

Exploring NIL support systems in NCAA Division I

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Abstract

“The NCAA’s adoption of a Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policy in the Summer of 2021 was a game changer for stakeholder groups throughout intercollegiate athletics. For athletes, NIL deals have ranged from product endorsers to financial compensation. For the NCAA, league offices, and member institutions, administrators are learning how to navigate this new and evolving landscape in intercollegiate athletics. As in any nascent enterprise, growing pains and issues have presented themselves, and it has grown into another differentiating factor between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in NCAA Division I athletics. For instance, while some athletes representing more prominent institutions that are well-supported by collectives (e.g. Ohio State University) have enjoyed financial windfalls since the adoption of NIL rights, athletic departments that are not as well-resourced may feel added pressure to attract and retain quality athletes in the NIL era, despite the NCAA’s commitment to avoid pay-for-play and improper inducements tied to attending a particular institution (Hosick, 2021). Furthermore, there may also be a discrepancy in the NIL education and support athletes from various schools are receiving, which can further widen the divide between the “haves” and “have-nots” in intercollegiate athletics. With discrepancy of opportunity in mind, the purpose of this study was to investigate the NIL infrastructure and support systems at each of four subcategories within NCAA Division I athletics. More specifically, data was collected from schools representing the autonomous or Power Five conferences (Big Ten Conference), Group of Five conferences (Mid-American Conference), Football Championship Subdivision (Ohio Valley Conference), and non-football playing institutions (Horizon League). Through a content analysis, the NIL infrastructure at each school from each league was investigated to better understand the support systems in place for athletes and teams by reviewing categories relevant to NIL such as staffing, collectives, third-party affiliations, and education. Findings highlighted that Big Ten Conference schools had a more well-resourced NIL infrastructure compared to other conferences. For example, all but three Big Ten schools had staff with NIL-specific job titles (including 4 such employees at Ohio State), while only one other institution (Robert Morris from the Horizon League) had a staff member with a NIL-specific job title. Additionally, collectives were much more abundant in the Big Ten than in the other conferences. However, although NIL infrastructure discrepancies existed between conferences, it was also discovered that there were discrepancies between schools within the same league. Additional findings and implications will be discussed.”