

ATHLETES.ORG

The Case for Athlete Representation and **Collective Bargaining**

CONGRESSIONAL COLLEGE ATHLETICS SUMMIT
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Athletes.org (AO) is the players association for college athletes: an independent, athlete-led organization that supports, represents and connects college athletes across all divisions and sports. **Currently, AO has more than 5,000 member athletes** from 575 different schools, with more than 2400 of those members from the Power Conferences.

AO exists to strengthen the collegiate athletics ecosystem by ensuring that athletes have an organized, informed and influential voice in shaping the future of college sports. **We impact athletes to impact the world.**

The organization operates on three core pillars:

- **Amplifying Athlete Voices:** AO provides structure for athlete feedback and participation in industry and policy discussions that impact their daily lives.
- **Providing On-Demand Support:** AO offers free, immediate access to vetted legal, medical and professional resources.
- **Maximizing Athlete Opportunity:** AO facilitates opportunities for athletes to succeed off-the-field, and post-career.

While AO is driven by college athletes and represents solely their interests, it actively collaborates with schools, conferences and governing bodies to advance shared goals of athlete welfare, competitive balance and long-term sustainability.

WHY AO MATTERS NOW

College athletics is undergoing its **most significant transformation in decades;** Legally, financially, and culturally. AO provides a stabilizing force amid that change:

- Ensures athletes are informed partners and participants in the growth, not passive bystanders and stakeholders.
- Encourages athlete engagement through structured, data-driven feedback loops.
- Provides athletes with the experts and support staff necessary to navigate and maximize the multibillion dollar sports and entertainment industry that college sports has become.
- Provides schools with an organized counterpart for dialogue and consensus-building.

By equipping athletes with the education, organization and support that they deserve, AO helps preserve the values and viability of college sports for all participants.

THE ATHLETE PERSPECTIVE

In an exclusive College Football Survey conducted by Athletes.org:

- 100% of athletes said college athletes should be represented by a players association.
- 94% said college football players who advance to additional games (e.g., bowl games, College Football Playoff) should receive cash bonuses.
- 71% said they would like to weigh in on offseason rules including: offseason calendars, non-contact periods for practice and the amount of padded practices a team is able to have.
- 91% said college football players should weigh-in on transfer portal rules.

- 100% said they would support negotiating compensation and payments with EA Sports for the NCAA Football video game.
- 97% said players should have access to independent medical professionals.
- 94% said they want to be educated on the pros and cons of being classified as an employee.
- 38% said they had been promised money at their school or collective that they never received upon completion of their agreement.

THE CASE FOR COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

In December 2025, Athletes.org made history by releasing the first-ever framework of terms of a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) designed to finally bring structure, fairness and sustainability to college sports.

AO developed this framework with direct input from current and recently graduated college athletes representing the perspectives, opinions and experiences of more than 5,000 members. In parallel, AO gained feedback from across the industry, organizing discussions with conference commissioners, athletic directors, general managers and legal experts with experience in collective bargaining at the professional level and a deep understanding of the collegiate space to ensure the proposed terms reflect the needs and concerns of all stakeholders.

College athletics is built on a faulty foundation. Collective bargaining would allow for the athletes to negotiate the terms of their participation in college athletics providing a clear, enforceable partnership allowing for unprecedented growth in the future. Anything less will be subject to future litigation and chaos regardless of how much capital is injected into the industry.

Read the full CBA Framework at athletes.org/CBA.

**In August, after a meeting to discuss a CBA for college athletics, AO anonymously surveyed 24 P4 football general managers. They unanimously agree that collective bargaining between athletes and their schools/the negotiating entity is necessary to create a sustainable and enforceable set of rules.*

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT AO'S CBA FRAMEWORK

What are the primary benefits of a CBA? How would one benefit college sports?

The benefits of a CBA include, but are not limited to: legally binding terms, establishing clear rules and guidelines, and legal and governmental protection for all parties. In the case of college sports, a CBA would help establish a system where athletes rights are no longer unlawfully suppressed and universities, conferences and the NCAA are not under constant legal duress.

Why is a CBA necessary for college athletics?

Currently, operational standards vary significantly across institutions, creating inconsistencies in all critical categories, contract language, compensation structures, medical care and more. A CBA establishes uniform national standards that all participating schools must meet, ensuring stability, equitable treatment and mutually agreed upon accountability measures regardless of institution.

Does a CBA require athlete employment status?

Not necessarily. Athletes.org maintains a neutral position on employment classification. In the future, courts could deem college athletes to be employees of their institutions or conferences Or, as we have proposed as an alternative, Congress could provide college athletes with a special status that would afford them more expansive labor rights without them being deemed employees.

What about right-to-work states?

A CBA would still be effective in a right-to-work state, just like in the NFL or another professional league. Professional athletes, in certain sports, are employees that have agreed to a CBA in their respective leagues. In right-to-work states, these athletes continue to benefit from collective representation through their players associations.

How does the CBA differ from the House settlement?

While the House settlement represented an initial step toward athlete compensation, it was just a settlement of three consolidated lawsuits. The settlement was never intended to establish a long-term framework for college sports. House does not provide comprehensive legal protection from future litigation or establish enforceable health and safety standards the way a CBA does in professional leagues. A CBA creates a sustainable long-term framework with robust legal protections unavailable through settlement agreements alone.

By adopting a similar model to the pros, college athletics can modernize without losing its educational mission, ensuring fairness, stability and long-term viability for institutions and athletes alike.

QUOTES IN SUPPORT OF AO'S CBA FRAMEWORK

"We've spent way too long reacting to court cases and chasing legislation while the status quo becomes less and less sustainable for our campuses and our athletes. We don't need to sit back and hope Congress fixes college sports for us – we need a collectively-bargained framework that brings schools and athletes to the same table, sets clear national rules, and creates a healthier, long-term model. AO's CBA draft isn't the final word, but it's exactly the kind of concrete proposal we should be engaging with if we want college sports to still be thriving a decade from now."

Danny White

Vice Chancellor and Director of Athletics, University of Tennessee

"I have long believed that collective bargaining between a national association of institutions and a representative student-athlete organization is the only realistic way to preserve what makes college sports special. Athletes.org's conceptual Collective Bargaining Agreement is an important step toward that kind of partnership-based framework—one where athletes have a real collective voice in setting the rules, and schools can compete on a fair and sustainable playing field instead of racing each other to the bottom and litigating every challenge. I'm encouraged to see this conversation happening more openly, so everyone can fully understand what's at stake. I support efforts to bring all stakeholders together to collaboratively shape our shared future."

Kent Syverud

*Current Chancellor and President, Syracuse University,
Incoming Chancellor, University of Michigan*

"I believe college athletics is a higher calling with an elevating and transformative effect on the countless number of lives it positively impacts. However, we are facing a pivotal moment and must embrace the inevitable change. In order to do that successfully, we need to have all parties at the table to forge a path to a future with clear enforceable rules, alignment with our educational academy and a durable framework that appropriately shares both the investment and growth of our entire enterprise in a stable and sustainable way. Undoubtedly, it's a complicated road to travel and new ideas will always oblige scrutiny and criticism. We can't let that deter us. Athletes.org's CBA draft may not be perfect today, but it's one of the first concrete blueprints I've seen which integrates the athlete's side of this paradigm shift. It includes the student-athlete's very necessary perspective around their rights and realities but it also identifies pathways for a wider athlete ecosystem of general

participation and Olympic hopefuls. There's more work to do but efforts like this move the conversation from abstract talking points to workable solutions."

Joe Castiglione

Vice President and Director of Athletics, University of Oklahoma

OUR STANCE ON THE SCORE ACT:

Athletes.org believes that the biggest threat facing both college athletes and college athletics as a whole today is the SCORE Act. The SCORE Act would maintain the unstable environment currently plaguing college athletics and would offer a federal antitrust exemption to a serial antitrust violator, to the detriment of college athletes. This bill, written almost exclusively based on input from and the wishes of the NCAA and Power 4 conferences, strips and severely limits college athletes' rights in the following ways:

- Unilaterally limiting athletes' earning potential by monitoring and subjectively restricting third party NIL payments.
- Limiting payments from schools to athletes through a salary cap that has not been negotiated and agreed upon by the athletes.
- Placing restrictions on college athletes' right to transfer and play at new schools, ultimately limiting their earning potential. This restriction, along with others have been affirmed by a federal court finding previous NCAA restrictions violate antitrust law.
- Prohibiting college athletes from being considered employees and receiving protection from federal employment laws.

**For our entire stance, find our official statement at Athletes.org.*

OUR STANCE ON SAFE:

Athletes.org welcomes the introduction of the SAFE Act as a stronger alternative to the deeply flawed SCORE Act. The SAFE Act is not perfect, because it does not include the most sustainable and necessary solution: collective bargaining. It does, however, still reflect Senator Cantwell's longstanding commitment to protecting college athletes at a pivotal time for the industry. Unlike the SCORE Act, the SAFE Act moves federal legislation in a more constructive direction.

THE FUTURE OF LEGISLATION:

Athletes.org has built a discussion draft bill inclusive of athlete input and remains ready to discuss how it or its components can be integrated into a bipartisan long term solution for college athletics. The "Save College Athletics Act" (Read the summary [here](#)) includes collective bargaining, a special non-employee status to address university concerns surrounding employment, all while protecting college athletes and their negotiating rights in the most equitable and sustainable manner possible.