"We do everything on our own": FBS Athletes’ Perceptions of NIL Value and Support

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"We do everything on our own":
FBS Athletes' Perceptions of NIL Value and Support

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Name, image, and likeness (NIL) has altered the landscape of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Specifically at the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level, college athletes are engaging with organizations through NIL opportunities and receiving financial and product-based compensation. While FBS college athletes have access to the lucrative NIL marketplace, NCAA member institutions are largely prohibited from facilitating deals on their behalf. Given the pervasiveness of NIL compensation, however, many collegiate athletic departments have implemented NIL educational programming for athletes and partnered with third party NIL-based companies (e.g., Opendorse, Postgame). As athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches) are permitted to educate but not facilitate NIL compensation, the present study sought to examine college athletes’ perceptions of their NIL value and institutional support. Findings indicate that college athletes’ have little perception of their NIL value and believe greater institutional support is necessary as they navigate the NIL marketplace.

Keywords: NCAA, gender equity, institutional support
State adoption of name, image, and likeness (NIL) legislation in the beginning of the 2021 academic year drastically altered the landscape of collegiate athletics. Previously, athletes competing at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions were prohibited from receiving financial remuneration of any kind (NCAA, 2020). Under pressure from changing state legislation, the NCAA amended existent policies pertaining to compensation permitting athletes to pursue and receive compensation based off their NIL (NCAA, 2022). Such policy permits athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches) to introduce athletes to prospective sponsors and sponsorship opportunities but prohibits member institutions from directly facilitating compensation of any kind beyond an athletic grant-in-aid (GIA) (Auerbach, 2022). While some state legislators have sought to, and subsequently removed such policies restricting direct institutional involvement facilitating NIL compensation to athletes (e.g., Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas) (Russo, 2023), the majority of NCAA member institutions operate in states that adhere to NCAA policy regarding NIL compensation for athletes.

Due to the proliferation of NIL opportunities on social media (Kian & Zimmerman, 2023), college athletes seeking to enter the NIL marketplace assume the role of social media influencer. The addition of the influencer role within the college athlete role set places further psychological strain on college athletes. This tension disproportionately affects other roles inherent to the college athlete role set, marginalizing academic and athletic performance (Fridley et al., 2023). Given the overtly negative effects of psychological strain on college athlete development fostered by the NIL marketplace and the lack of scholarly work examining the perspectives of college athletes, the present study sought to examine current NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) athletes’ perceptions of NIL.

NIL Marketplace

Since the inception of NIL, the formation of NIL collectives comprised of contributors (e.g., boosters, fans) have become commonplace at many FBS NCAA member institutions (Kirshner, 2023; Nakos, 2022). Given that very few states permit institutions from directly facilitating NIL compensation, NIL collectives occupy more autonomy in facilitating sponsorship and marketing agreements on behalf of prospective recruits and enrolled athletes (McCarthy, 2022). The lack of universal regulatory framework has not only manifested in the rise of NIL collectives but also created a patchwork of NIL laws that differ from state to state. Given that NIL policy is being actively regulated at both the institutional (i.e., NCAA) and state level, such state specific NIL language serves to disorient the marketplace and may lead institutions to alienate athletes in their pursuit of NIL compensation (Sports Business Journal, 2023). Moorman and Cocco (2023) illustrated the inherent conflict created by individual state NIL laws arguing that institutions should craft NIL policies consistent with the mission and priorities of the institution itself. As differentiation of NIL legislation inter-state may foster conflict among athletic department institutional members (i.e., coaches, administrators, staff), athletes themselves may experience increasing psychological tension as they attempt to navigate the NIL marketplace with little to no direct institutional support.
**NILs Impact on Recruiting**

Not surprisingly given the importance of recruiting within NCAA competition (Caro, 2012; Elmasry, 2017; Kercheval, 2016; Mankin et al., 2021), NIL compensation has become an integral component in the recruitment of prospective athletes (Crabtree, 2022a; Murschel, 2022). In a highly publicized instance, five-star football recruit Jaden Rashada delayed his enrollment to the University of Florida and, ultimately, requested a release from his national letter of intent (NLI) due to financial discrepancies in NIL compensation. In this specific case, the original NIL compensation offered by an NIL collective affiliated with the University of Florida was altered prior to Rashada’s enrollment at the university (Mandel & Staples, 2023). While recruits have historically prioritized athletic and social factors when making their college enrollment decision (Corr et al., 2020, 2022; Lawrence et al., 2009; Letawsky et al., 2003; Seifried, 2007, 2009), guaranteed – or the potential for – NIL compensation serves as a significant factor for many recruits when determining their enrollment decision (Crabtree, 2022a; Murschel, 2022).

While member institutions are largely prohibited from facilitating NIL deals, the importance of NIL within the recruitment process compels athletic departments to invest in NIL education and infrastructure. Many Division I member institutions have partnered with NIL marketplace platforms (e.g., Opendorse, INFLCR) to centralize their NIL programming and provide athletes a resource to pursue NIL compensation (Bromberg, 2021). Opendorse, one of the major online NIL marketplaces (Kian & Zimmerman, 2023), provides a platform in which organizations or fans can target college athletes in specific geographic markets to promote a product or brand. Opendorse offers various transactions (e.g., social media post, autograph) and indicates the price an athlete charges per unique transaction (Opendorse, n.d.). While athletes can adjust their pricing manually, Opendorse automatically creates a profile for all athletes and lists adjusted market pricing rates for basic transactions when an institution enters a contractual agreement with the company. The Opendorse Athlete Rate Card (ARC) takes into account the breadth of NIL deals facilitated on the platform and, broadly, the location of a university, division or subdivision classification (e.g., Division I, Football Bowl Subdivision [FBS]), sport, and number of social media followers an athlete has (Opendorse, 2022). A recent examination of over 9,000 Division I athlete Opendorse profiles revealed significant differentiations in desired compensation across gender, sport, and division/subdivision classification (Weiner, 2023). While Opendorse provides a market rate calculation (i.e., ARC) for athletes to reference when determining their NIL value, Weiner (2023) concluded that college athletes have varying perceptions of their NIL value. These findings were exceedingly apparent among non-revenue and women’s sports and are perhaps exacerbated by the lack of standardization and reporting structure in the NIL marketplace.

**NIL Collectives and Gender Equity**

In January 2023, college sport thinktank and advocacy organization, The Drake Group, requested the United States Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights examine NCAA member institutions investment in NIL initiatives (Christovich, 2023a). The organization asserted that NIL compensation was being primarily directed to men’s sport athletes at NCAA member institutions. Indeed, a 2022 study found that while there are more than 250 NIL collectives across Division I athletics, only 34% had offered compensation to women’s sport athletes (Christovich, 2023b). Strikingly, a 2023 study found that women’s sport athletes accounted for only 23% of active partnerships with NIL collectives (Wittry, 2023). Although a greater number of NIL opportunities exist for athletes in men’s sports in aggregate, women’s sport athletes often average
more monetary return per NIL transaction (Cocco & Moorman, 2022). Such earnings potential alone is reason enough for institutions and collectives to actively seek out and provide resources for athletes in both men’s and women’s sports.

While NIL coordinators and programming have become commonplace across Division I athletics (Kirshner, 2023; Nakos, 2022), much of the institutional investment in NIL has been contextualized for the benefit of men’s sport athletes. During the Fall of 2022 for instance, the University of Florida athletic department staff directory listed an NIL coordinator but indicated this individual specifically works for the football program (Florida Gators, n.d.). While the University of Florida hired a staff member in January 2023 to oversee NIL across the breadth of NCAA sponsored sport offerings (de la Torre, 2023), such disparities in institutional support intra-athletic department may lend themselves to differing perceptions of value among college athletes (Weiner, 2023).

Other Perceptions of NIL

While still novel, the NIL marketplace has significantly altered the framework of collegiate athletics. Given the stratification of college campuses across the United States, the impact of NIL is felt most appreciably at the grassroots level (Goodbread, 2022; Gregory, 2021). Such emphasis on individualized local markets contributes to the median NIL transaction value of $53 (Hunzinger, 2022a). While an estimated 66% of NIL compensation went to athletes in Power-5 sports in 2021-2022 (Hunzinger, 2022a), Division I athletics comprises a significant marketplace for NIL given the number of participating athletes and the stature of championship events (e.g., Division I men’s basketball tournament). In addition, while football athletes comprise the majority of NIL compensation, women’s sport athletes hold a potentially lucrative segment within the NIL marketplace. In fact, in all non-football sports, women’s sport athletes are receiving greater compensation from NIL deals than men’s sports athletes (Hunzinger, 2022b). While still novel, NIL poses a significant opportunity for athletes at all divisional classifications and sports (Cocco & Moorman, 2022).

Accordingly, the present study sought to examine Division I FBS college athletes’ perceptions of their NIL value as well as perceptions of institutional support provided to partake in the NIL marketplace. The following research questions were developed to assist in the construction of the qualitative methodological approach utilized in this study:

RQ 1: How aware are Division I FBS college athletes of their NIL value?

RQ 2: Does perception of NIL value differ among men’s sport and women’s sport athletes?

RQ 3: Does perception of NIL value differ depending on the sport an athlete competes in?

RQ 4: What are Division I FBS college athletes’ perceptions of the institutional support provided to partake in the NIL marketplace?
Method

Interview Procedure

A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to examine NCAA FBS athletes’ perceptions of their NIL value. Both face-to-face and virtual interviews were conducted by the primary researcher of the manuscript and spanned roughly 15-minutes in length. All interviews took place between the months of January and March 2023. Participants were asked to provide demographic information related to their gender, academic year (e.g., freshman, junior), institution, NCAA sport(s) competed in, and total number of social media followers across all pertinent platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok). Participants were subsequently asked to provide details on the details of the NIL deals, if applicable (e.g., number of deals, partnerships, renumeration). Participants were asked if they negotiated any of their NIL deals and how much they charged for NIL-related services. Lastly, participants were asked to discuss the educational programming and level of support they received from their respective institutions. The use of a semi-structure protocol allowed the researcher to prompt participants to expand on unique components embedded within responses to questions.

Interviews were recorded and stored on a password protected device made only available to members of the research team. Upon completion, interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy by each of the researchers. Member-checking was utilized to allow participants to check their responses for accuracy. An in-vivo coding schema was deemed the most appropriate mechanism to capture representative responses of participants within the context of the four primary research questions. The researchers commenced axial coding to group similar in-vivo codes among the participants (Creswell et al., 2007). During coding, researchers routinely compared notes and coded responses to ensure the accuracy and validity of responses (Thompson et al., 1989). Participants were assigned a pseudonym and all identifying information was omitted from the transcripts to ensure anonymity. Each participants’ responses were coded across the four primary research questions and utilized verbatim to ensure the accuracy of findings. Data saturation was achieved upon the coding of the twelfth participant’s interview.

Sampling Method

The researchers implemented a snowball sampling method to engage and attract participants to partake in interviews. Identifying ten athletes at two NCAA member institutions through personal communication, the researchers were able to utilize each athlete’s social network to connect with additional participants. Each of the initial ten athletes contacted participated in the semi-structured interview and provided the contact information for others they believed would be willing to participate (Parker et al., 2019). Participants were contacted by the primary researcher and asked if they would be willing to discuss their experiences and perceptions of NIL. Each athlete was currently enrolled and participating in a sport at an NCAA Division I FBS member institution. Institutions varied from Power-5 institutions with greater than $100 million-dollar annual revenues to Group of Five institutions with $25 to $40 million-dollar annual budgets. Given that the largest concentration of NIL compensation has been at the Division I FBS level (Hunzinger, 2022a), and more specifically at the Power-5 subdivision level, researchers sought to operationalize participants to this specific classification (i.e., FBS Power-5, FBS Group of Five). Snowball sampling was again implemented upon the completion of interviews with each athlete participant.
While not a component of the researchers’ initial design, the number of athletes willing to discuss their experiences and perceptions of NIL was a noteworthy finding. Contrary to the traditionally insular nature of collegiate athletics (Adams et al., 2014; Brown, 2012; Gutierrez & McLaren, 2012; Kihl, 2018; LoMonte, 2020; Southall & Weiler, 2014), college athlete participants in this study were more than eager to discuss their experiences and perceptions with NIL. Perhaps due to the distinct demarcation between athletic department institutional members and NIL compensation, in which the facilitation of compensation is prohibited at the majority of NCAA member institutions, participants were emboldened to share their NIL experiences with the primary researcher. As phenomenological examination of college athletes has been cited as difficult for the fear of institutional retribution (Adler & Adler, 1991; David et al., 2018; Howe, 2023), the willingness of participants to discuss NIL was of note.

**Findings**

Thirty-one athletes from five NCAA FBS member institutions were interviewed as part of this study. Fourteen participants competed in women’s sports and 17 in men’s sports. Likely due to the sampling technique implemented, the majority of athletes currently compete at NCAA FBS Group-of-5 institutions \((n = 29)\). Ten unique sports are represented in the sample and the average number of social media followers was 3,364 (see Table 1). While nearly every participant indicated they had pursued NIL deals, only 14 had secured an NIL deal at the time the interviews took place. NIL deals varied widely from product-based compensation to financial transactions. Each participants indicated that product-based compensation was delivered to their residence and financial compensation was coordinated through a third-party money transfer service (e.g., Venmo, PayPal).

**RQ 1: Perception of the NIL Value**

Among the participants, only two \((n = 2)\) indicated they had a perception of their NIL value. Madison, a Group-of-5 women’s soccer player, stated she had made over $1,000 in NIL deals the previous academic semester alone. Noting the longevity of a social media post, Madison stated that given her social media following, “We are putting that on our feed permanently. The competitive market is anywhere from $50-$100. So I charge $70 [per post].” Discussing further her NIL value, Madison added:

Initially, I didn’t negotiate my offer but now I am. I have around 2150 Instagram followers. If you charge $50-$100 per post, how much engagement am I getting? Are these successful? I feel like I’ve been doing everything on time, I’ve followed through…some [companies] are offering $10 or $20. That’s not even worth my time.

Shanti, a Group-of-5 women’s tennis player with over 60,000 social media followers, also detailed a perception of her own NIL value:

I negotiated most offers. Due to my social media, I post for a minimum of $250…I would say I wouldn’t get paid as much as athletes that go to [Power-5 schools] and I know that but I use my social media to get higher [sic] pay.

Both Madison and Shanti indicated that social media was the most important resource for college athletes to pursue NIL deals. Regarding the importance of social media, Shanti stated:
Definitely important for NIL deals. [Companies] can see the type of content you create and how engaged people are with your posts which allows you to ask for higher [sic] pay. I have also got [sic] approached by companies to do collaborations because of this and that helps you grow your audience even further.

Evidenced of the importance of social media, Shanti added, “Some offers on Opendorse say you have to have a minimum of 10,000 followers to get the deal.”

While Shanti discussed the value of growing a social media following, Madison detailed the importance of developing an online presence:

I think that being relatively present on social media is also important. I post on my TikTok. I try to do it every day. I have a lot of Instagram posts. I have a presence. Brands do notice that. They do want an athlete, but they want a presence.

Madison and Shanti were the only two participants in this study that indicated they had a perception of their NIL value. Madison has a relatively modest following of 3,000 on social media compared to Shanti’s 63,000 followers. Despite these differences in social media following, both Madison and Shanti indicated they had made thousands of dollars through NIL-based financial compensation. While Shanti acknowledges her social media following benefits her in securing NIL deals, Madison contended that any current college athlete could have success in the vast NIL marketplace: “I’m not a starter. I’m getting ACL surgery. Like, if I can do it, anybody can.”

Limited Awareness of NIL Value. The majority of the participants in this study indicated they had no awareness of their NIL value. For participants actively engaged in NIL partnerships, this lack of awareness often manifested in accepting any offer extended to them. Stewart, a Group-of-5 men’s cross country runner, stated that when offered his first NIL deal “I just accepted the offer because every athlete has the same deal. My perception of my value isn’t much [sic] because I am not an elite athlete.” When asked to elaborate on why she accepted whatever NIL compensation a company offered, Elizabeth – a Group-of-5 women’s soccer player – stated, “Because it’s [institution name omitted]. You just take whatever because not many people get offered stuff here.” Stan, a baseball player at the same institution as Elizabeth, also discussed the effect the institution’s geographic location held on his ability to receive NIL compensation, “I’ve tried. I’ve applied for like over 100 deals and gotten none. We’re in [institution city, state omitted].” Jamie, a Power-5 women’s soccer player, similarly stated, “At [institution name omitted], we aren’t exactly offered deals directly from like surrounding businesses.”

Lennard, a Group-of-5 football player, hasn’t pursued NIL deals to this point stating, “I’ve never thought to look. Didn’t think I’d have any value.” Kevin, another Group-of-5 football player, currently has multiple NIL deals that provide both product and financial based compensation said, “I have no perception of how much I’m worth.” Another Group-of-5 football player, Daniel, thought that he would have value given he started on the football team but didn’t feel he had the time to pursue NIL compensation. Overall, 16 (n = 16) of the participants shared a similar sentiment that pursuing NIL opportunities was too time consuming and conflicted with their already strenuous time demands as an FBS college athlete. While she initially pursued compensation, Elizabeth stated, “I used to have [NIL] deals but don’t anymore. It was too much work to keep up with.” Mark, a Group-of-5 baseball player, stated that the majority of deals he’s
been offered are product-based and he does not feel they are worth his time or effort. While many college athletes are engaged or pursuing NIL compensation, the conflict between the time demands of collegiate athletics participation and the pursuit of NIL deals is exceedingly evident from participant responses in this study.

**Table 1**

*Breakdown of Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>NCAA Classification</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Social Media Followers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shanti</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
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<td>Stan</td>
<td>Group-of-5</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>3,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shawnteal</td>
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<td>Women’s Golf</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3,500</td>
</tr>
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<td>3,000</td>
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<td>Women’s Golf</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>2,100</td>
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<td>Myles</td>
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<td>Graduate</td>
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<td>Group-of-5</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>1,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Football</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
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<td>Miranda</td>
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<td>Women’s Tennis</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ 2: Perception by Gender**

Fourteen of the participants interviewed in this study currently compete in FBS women’s sports and 17 compete in FBS men’s sports. Overall, two participants indicated they thought gender played a role in a college athlete’s ability to receive NIL compensation. Angelique, a Group-of-5 women’s golfer, discussed the importance of a women’s sport athlete’s physical...
appearance in garnering a social media following stating, “All the big followers [sic] are pretty. All the big Instagram, Twitter, TikTok’ers are pretty. People are attracted to appearance or performance.” Clarice, a Power-5 women’s tennis player, stated similarly that women’s sport athletes had to be “Instagram models or NCAA champs” to have marketing appeal to companies. Both Angelique and Clarice’s notations indicate that while appearance is significant, athletic performance is equally important for a women’s sport athlete to grow their social media following. No men indicated that gender played a role in a college athlete’s ability to secure NIL compensation.

RQ 3: Perception by Sport

Participants routinely indicated that sport was a significant factor to determining a college athlete’s ability to receive NIL compensation. As indicated previously, Daniel indicated that he has not pursued any NIL deals but thought he’d have value due to the fact that he was a starter on the football team. Clarice discussed how athletes at her institution are required to use the platform Opendorse and attend meetings each semester that discussed NIL:

We were actually required to do stuff through [Opendorse]. We also had all-athlete meetings every semester, sometimes twice a semester, where they talked about NIL amongst other things. Most of the time, the meeting they had would’ve helped football. [Institution name omitted] tennis players kind of laughed at it.

Mark indicated that he might receive more NIL opportunities from companies “if I was on the football team.” Mitch, a Group-of-5 men’s track & field and cross country runner, currently has multiple NIL deals that provide product-based compensation. He stated that he believes his ability to receive financial compensation and NIL deals with more companies is limited due to the sport he competes in: “Track is not as popular as a sport.” Similar perceptions from non-football sport athletes were common throughout interviews.

While many of the participants indicated that sport was a significant factor influencing the ability to receive NIL compensation, Madison contended that opportunities are available to many athletes: “Initially, I thought they’re only going to give deals to SEC [Southeastern Conference] football players, I’ll just accept whatever they offer. But that’s not true.” Detailing the number of unique companies and brands seeking partnerships with college athletes, Madison stated that college athletes from any sport have the ability to engage in the NIL marketplace. Gail, a Group-of-5 women’s soccer player, also stated that she believed college athletes from any sport could earn NIL compensation but that the market is different depending on the sport and an athlete’s performance.

RQ 4: Perception of Institutional Support

Perceptions of institutional support were mixed among participants. Madison discussed how the application Opendorse made communicating NIL deals with athletic compliance simple: “The app automatically sends everything to my compliance officer, so I haven’t had to worry about that.” Other athletes were critical of the value that Opendorse provided to athletes at their respective institutions. Shawnteal and Sammie, both women’s golf athletes at a Group-of-5 institution, stated that Opendorse was “a waste of money” and indicated they believed the athletic department could allocate the funding used to partner with Opendorse to much more impactful resources to educate athletes on NIL. Many athletes mentioned the prices for various
transactions (e.g., social media post, autographs) automatically included on their Opendorse profile. Gail stated, “I have no clue what these prices are…I think we link our social media and they analyze it and establish a price.” Jamie competes at an institution that partners with Opendorse and also expressed confusion about the prices listed on her Opendorse profile. However, she did state that a compliance officer at her institution just provided an additional resource to assist athletes in determining their value: “We just got invited to a new app called Postgame that shows us based on our followers and interactions on social media how much our value is [sic].”

Thirty of the 31 participants in this study indicated that social media following was the most important component for college athletes to create value in the NIL marketplace. Jamie stated, “Yes, it matters. I’ve been turned down on a deal because I didn’t have enough [followers] and some brands only will consider those [athletes] with 2,000 plus.” Stewart also stated, “The more followers you have the better because your platform is bigger which gives [sic] you more deals.” While nearly every participant indicated social media following was of utmost importance in the NIL marketplace, many expressed frustrations with the lack of education provided by their institution regarding expanding their social media presence. Jamie stated, “I think [institution name omitted] also doesn’t help or give us enough guidance. We do everything on our own.” Angelique also stated regarding the athletic department at her institution, “They’re slacking in that department definitely. I’m sure in football they’re like really high on that or other big sports but they don’t really do that for us.”

While lack of education was noted by many participants, the direct role of athletic department institutional members was also scrutinized. Jamie stated in reference to her athletic department’s assistance navigating the NIL marketplace, “I know some athletes at other schools have been targeted while for us, most likely, we have to find [deals] ourselves through apps or direct contact.” Sammie noted that she understands different social media platforms warrant different types of payment amounts due to the education provided at her institution, but she needs assistance in determining informed prices she should charge per transaction. Shawnteal also indicated that her institution provided basic NIL education, but more was still necessary for athletes to make informed decisions when dealing with companies. She also noted her institution’s requirement that all NIL compensation must be approved by athletic compliance was a barrier for athletes pursuing NIL deals. Further, Shawnteal stated that athletic compliance officers at her institution often disincentivized athletes from pursuing NIL compensation:

We have to get everything approved by compliance here. A lot of the time they’ll tell athletes that a deal isn’t worth their time if it is for gear or something or for not much money.

While Shawnteal and Sammie were the only athletes to mention dissuasion from the pursuit of NIL compensation by athletic department institutional members, nearly all of the participants in this study indicated their institution didn’t invest enough resources to NIL for competing athletes.

**Discussion & Implications**

The majority of participating NCAA Division I FBS athletes in this study indicate that they have little to no perception of their NIL market value. Consistent with the conclusions of Weiner (2023), college athletes seemingly have limited perception of their NIL value and minimal understanding of how to navigate the NIL marketplace in general. In addition, nearly every participant in this study indicated inadequate institutional support for NIL education.
While a handful of prospective recruits and current college athletes have NIL earnings that make hiring representation (e.g., agent, financial advisor) economically feasible (Athletic Director U, n.d.), the participants in this study represent themselves and navigate the NIL marketplace on their own. Though the majority of NCAA member institutions are prohibited from the facilitation of NIL deals, every athletic department can implement programming to assist athletes in navigating the vast NIL marketplace.

While no participant indicated feeling their sport or gender restricted them from the NIL marketplace, many non-football athletes stated that their respective athletic department catered NIL efforts and programming to football players specifically. Such perceptions from non-football athletes may align with The Drake Group’s call for the United States Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights to investigate institutional investment in NIL programming for specific sports (i.e., football). Understanding that the two highest NIL earners in this study were a women’s tennis and soccer athlete, athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches) should consider making a concerted effort to provide NIL education and programming to all sponsored sports. Indeed, during the 2022-2023 academic year and led by women’s sport athletes, Louisiana State University (LSU) outperformed most of their counterparts in NIL compensation. Such performance centered around the state of Louisiana’s adoption of legislation permitting institutions to facilitate NIL compensation for college athletes (Crabtree, 2022b) and the active investment in NIL resources for women’s sport athletes specifically (Christovich, 2023c).

Accordingly, rather than hiring an NIL staff member for a specific sport, athletic administrators may consider hiring an NIL officer(s) to oversee and engage with all sports. While financial viability for the creation of such a position(s) is understandable for most non-Power-5 institutional members, utilizing existent athletic compliance and athletic development staff members to provide comprehensive NIL programming to all sports may be a feasible alternative. Some FBS member institutions have created specific NIL initiatives for women’s sport athletes as well (e.g., University of Memphis 901Women), serving as a potentially financially feasible mechanism to stimulate the growth of NIL opportunities to a number of athletes.

Furthermore, there were perceptions of barriers to brand growth identified by different genders. Perhaps due to television viewership or fan following, the non-football male athletes felt that their growth was limited by the sport they played, regardless of their success. Alternatively, female participants indicated that success and physical attractiveness were primary drivers of NIL brands. These findings for collegiate athletes would be consistent with scholarly literature which has suggested in the past that physical attractiveness and sex appeal has been used extensively to market professional female athletes (Fink et al., 2014; Greenwell et al., 2017; Lopries, 2018; McClearen, 2021; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Additionally, the athlete’s own perception of physical attractiveness being important is mirrored between this study on collegiate athletes and the professional study done by Lobpries et al. (2018). Notably, no male athletes mentioned physical attractiveness in their own perception of value.

Outsourced marketing is not new in college athletics, though athletic administrators might consider reevaluating the value of partnerships with third party NIL companies to their college athletes. As athletes in this study felt that Opendorse is insufficient as a resource for NIL education and partnerships, these findings suggest funds allocated to such partnerships may be more efficiently utilized elsewhere (e.g., hiring NIL staff). When asked about the nature of the relationship between the athletic department and Opendorse, an FBS compliance officer stated:

We partner with Opendorse but don’t set prices on athletes’ accounts. We can’t negotiate deals for athletes but offer them Opendorse as a resource. Our people in communications...
upload images to Opendorse that athletes can use freely to promote themselves on social media but that’s the extent that we work with the company itself. (FBS compliance officer, personal communication, February 24, 2023)

Given this relative marginal return, we contend that institutional partnerships with third party NIL platforms need to be reevaluated. Every participant in this study is enrolled at an institution currently partnered with Opendorse. Despite this, 94% of the athlete participants in this study indicated they have no perception of their NIL value, and the majority stated a lack of understanding of how to navigate the NIL marketplace. Without information on the nature of the agreement with the athletics department, it is hard to evaluate the value to the institution. However, the findings of this study bring into question the value Opendorse brings to the college athletes themselves, and warrants attention from athletic administrators.

Institutional support in navigating the contemporary NIL marketplace would assist athletes in mitigating psychological strains relative their influencer role (Fridley et al., 2023). As individuals perform at higher levels when psychological stressors are managed effectively, such mitigation of psychological strain simultaneously benefits athletes and athletic department institutional members from an academic and athletic performance standpoint. However, it is important to note that institutional mechanisms prevent NCAA member institutions from providing comparable resources and support for college athletes. Given the majority of the athletes in this study represent institutions competing at the Group of Five level, such broad-based increase of institutional NIL support may be financially infeasible. While athletes competing at Power-5 institutions that participated in this study noted similar structural deficiencies in NIL support at their respective institutions, the drastically differentiated economic realities and capabilities of differing NCAA division and subdivision member institutions serve to perpetuate institutionalized discrepancies in college athletes’ ability to monetize their NIL. While extant literature has established the presence of a dynamic NIL marketplace inter-NCAA divisions (Cocco & Moorman, 2022; Kunkel et al., 2021), these studies also note the predisposition for Power-5 athletes to occupy greater NIL earnings potential due to a variety of environmental factors (e.g., fandom, television viewing, size of institutional). As such, the combination of environmental predispositions and financial disparity serve to foster inequity within the NIL marketplace. Such inequity holds significant practical ramifications from the standpoints of recruiting and athlete role conflict, among others.

A common theme from many of the participants in this study was the location of their institution impacting their ability to secure NIL compensation. Four of the five FBS institutions represented in this study are quintessential college towns in which the population of the university comprises the majority of the city population (Gumprecht, 2003). Such distinct geographic settings are commonplace among NCAA FBS member institutions (Gumprecht, 2003) and may well, as indicated by many participants in this study, serve as a detriment to college athletes’ ability to receive NIL compensation. However, while athletic departments are largely prohibited from facilitating NIL deals, they are permitted to introduce athletes to potential NIL opportunities (e.g., companies, individuals, collectives) (Auerbach, 2022) and can create impactful NIL awareness within their regional communities. For instance, only one of the 31 participants in this study had social media handles listed on their respective athletic department biographic webpage. As pursuing individual introductions between athletes and potential local NIL partners may be infeasible, efforts such as providing web links to athletes’ social media profiles on institutional operated athletic department websites is a near effortless task for sports information directors (SIDs) or website administrators that may increase an athlete’s social media following. As participating athletes in this study indicated that social media following was
directly related to NIL attainability – and Opendorse’s ARC determines value in part based off an athletes’ aggregate social media following – providing web links and social media handles in online and print materials is a potential mechanism for athletic departments to increase the awareness of their athletes’ social media profiles.

However, such efforts to publicize athletes’ social media profiles would serve to the primary – if not exclusive – benefit of athletes themselves. Accordingly, institutional support of NIL initiatives and education may be perceived to be minimal by the athletes participating in this study because it does not fall into the operationalized job functions of athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches). At Duke University, men’s basketball general manager, Rachel Baker, is tasked with the professional development of each athlete on the roster. A former employee of sport apparel company Nike, a primary component of Baker’s job is to assist Duke men’s basketball players in navigating the NIL marketplace. Emphasizing the prominence of NIL within her role, Baker stated, “I think the less (head coach Jon Scheyer) needs to hear about [NIL] or focus on it, the better that we can be” (Steinberg, 2022, para. 6). While NIL is a primary component of her job, Baker has also stated:

Two of our guys have the exact same [NIL] contract with a company. One of them, it’s literally pulling teeth trying to get him to record and share and post these videos; the other one, it’s nothing at all. So it’s a matter of figuring out, this $5,000 deal may make a lot of sense for you — but this stresses you out so much, is it really worth it? Because I need you to go play basketball. (Marks & Tucker, 2023)

Both of Baker’s comments are illustrative of the contradictory logics present within the roles of varying athletic department institutional members. Coaches are expected to coach and win games. Not surprising, extant literature has found that coaching job attainment and retention is tied to winning in collegiate athletics (Caro, 2012; Mankin et al., 2021). While athlete development staff may be tasked with the development of college athletes, NIL may not be a prioritized component of development if it comes at the sake of winning. Similar to Shawnteal’s comments, athletic department institutional members may dissuade athletes from pursuing NIL compensation if they perceive it will affect their competitive performance. Such contradictions within operating logic(s) are commonplace in collegiate athletics and require athletic department institutional members to make sense (i.e., *sensemaking*) of their various roles and responsibilities (Corr et al., 2022; Macaulay et al., 2022). In the context of NIL compensation, such contradictory logic formation among athletic department institutional members may serve to the detriment of college athletes’ pursuits of financial gain through NIL deals. Future research examining athletic department institutional members’ perceptions of NIL compensation within their job functions would provide a greater understanding of the value placed on NIL education and programming at the institutional level.

**Limitations & Future Research**

While interview participants in this study produced robust responses regarding their perceptions of NIL, the findings of this study are inherently limited by the nature of the sample size. Snowball sampling exists as a limitation as well and contributes, along with the sample size, to the lack of generalizability of the findings of this study. Researchers understood this limitation and made efforts to engage athletes from a variety of sports and institutions to assist in the representatives of the sample. An additional limitation is the number of participants that had not
received NIL-based compensation. Future research securing a larger, more generalizable, sample size would be valuable in contextualizing college athletes’ perceptions of their NIL value.

Although institutional completion level (e.g., Power-5, Group of Five) has a direct impact on athletes’ NIL value, a dynamic marketplace exists across the varying competition levels comprising the NCAA and collegiate athletics in general (Cocco & Moorman, 2022; Kunkel et al., 2021). While the sampling method in this study most likely led to the representation of predominantly Group of Five institutions, future research establishing comparisons between athletes’ perceptions of NIL value at varying competition levels may provide insight into the potential disparities, or lack thereof, created by NIL. In addition, while participants’ racial demography was not included as a metric of analysis in this study, future research examining different raced athletes’ perspectives of NIL would be valuable to understanding the prevalence of structural marginalization within the NIL marketplace, similar to that experienced by women’s sport athletes.

As indicated by findings in this study, college athletes at various levels (e.g., Division I, FBS) and institutions may be dissuaded from pursuing NIL opportunities. The potential for such discouragement on behalf of athletic department institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) warrants further examination. Such examination may yield a further understanding of the varying unique institutional logics that exist within the NCAA institutional field (Corr et al., 2022; Nite et al., 2019; Southall & Nagel, 2009; Southall et al., 2008) and the presence of competing logics among institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches, staff) and college athletes themselves regarding financial compensation.

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