From Student-Athletes to Employee-Athletes: Why a "Pay for Play" Model of College Sports Would Not Necessarily Make Educational Scholarships Taxable

Marc Edelman
City University of New York, Baruch College, Marc.Edelman@baruch.cuny.edu
FROM STUDENT-ATHLETES TO EMPLOYEE-ATHLETES: WHY A “PAY FOR PLAY” MODEL OF COLLEGE SPORTS WOULD NOT NECESSARILY MAKE EDUCATIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS TAXABLE

MARC EDELMAN

INTRODUCTION............................................................................................................................................. 1138
I. THE CHANGING ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF BIG-TIME COLLEGE SPORTS................................. 1141
   A. Historic Treatment of U.S. College Athletes .............................................................................. 1141
   B. Three Approaches to Reforming College Sports ..................................................................... 1143
      1. Voluntary NCAA Reform ....................................................................................................... 1144
      2. The Unionizing of College Athletes ...................................................................................... 1145
      3. Reform Ordered by Antitrust Law ....................................................................................... 1146
   C. Political, Media, and Academic Perspectives on the Tax Implications of College Sports Reform........................................................................................................................................ 1148
II. A BASIC PRIMER ON FEDERAL INCOME TAX LAW .................................................................. 1150
   A. An Introduction to U.S. Tax Law and the Definitions of “Gross Income” and Taxable Income.................................................................................................................................................. 1150
   B. Notable Reductions from “Gross Income” ............................................................................... 1151
      1. Section 117: Qualified Scholarship Exemption .................................................................... 1151
      2. Section 127: Exemption for Educational Assistance Paid by Employer ............................ 1155
      3. Section 132: Exempted Fringe Benefits ............................................................................. 1156
      4. Section 119: Meals and Lodging for the Convenience of the Employer ........................... 1158
      5. Section 162(a): Trade or Business Expenses Deduction .................................................. 1158
III. HOW COLLEGES MIGHT PROVIDE THEIR ATHLETES WITH BONA FIDE EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS WITHOUT RISKING THE TAX-EXEMPT STATUS OF ATHLETES’ SCHOLARSHIPS .... 1161
   A. “Pay for Play” Athletes and the “Qualified Scholarship” Exemption ..................................... 1161
   B. Alternative Tax Reductions under “Pay for Play” .................................................................... 1163
      1. Devising an Educational Assistance Program that Benefits College Athletes ................. 1163
      2. Offering Free Education to Athletes as a Fringe Benefit .................................................... 1165
      3. Allowing Athletes to Pay for College Themselves and then Take the Costs as a Trade or Business Deduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1166
CONCLUSION............................................................................................................................................... 1168
FROM STUDENT-ATHLETES TO EMPLOYEE-ATHLETES: WHY A “PAY FOR PLAY” MODEL OF COLLEGE SPORTS WOULD NOT NECESSARILY MAKE EDUCATIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS TAXABLE

MARC EDELMAN

Abstract: In recent years, numerous commentators have called for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (“NCAA”) to relax its rules prohibiting athlete pay. This movement to allow athletes to share in the revenues of college sports arises from the belief that college athletes sacrifice too much time, personal autonomy, and physical health to justify their lack of pay. It further criticizes the NCAA’s “no pay” rules for keeping the revenues derived from college sports “in the hands of a select few administrators, athletic directors, and coaches.” Nevertheless, opponents of “pay for play” contend that several problems will emerge from lifting the NCAA’s “no pay” rules. One problem, opponents argue, is that granting college athletes the legal status of “employees” would convert the athletes’ tax-exempt scholarships into taxable income—a result that may offset any economic benefits of “pay for play.” Their argument, however, is not necessarily accurate. This article discusses the economic and legal landscape of big-time college sports, and introduces the fallacious legal argument that “pay for play” would saddle college athletes with substantial tax liability related to their educational scholarships. This article then provides a brief primer on the U.S. tax code—exploring sections of the code that may allow for paid college athletes to enjoy a tax-free education. Finally, this article explains that proper tax planning may allow colleges to pay their athletes without requiring the athletes to pay taxes on their educational scholarships.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, numerous commentators have called for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (“NCAA”) to relax its rules prohibiting ath-
This movement to allow athletes to share in the revenues of college sports arises from the belief that college athletes sacrifice too much time, personal autonomy, and physical health to justify their lack of pay. It further criticizes the NCAA’s “no pay” rules for keeping the revenues derived from college sports “in the hands of a select few administrators, athletic directors, and coaches.”


2 See Marc Edelman, A Short Treatise on Amateurism and Antitrust Law: Why the NCAA’s No-Pay Rules Violate Section 1 of the Sherman Act, 64 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 61, 77 (2013) (noting that the average Division I college football player spends more time playing and preparing for football than the typical full-time hourly worker); see also Michael H. LeRoy, An Invisible Union for an Invisible Labor Market: College Football and the Union Substitution Effect, 2012 WIS. L. REV. 1077, 1099 (citing to an NCAA study that showed the average Division I college football player devoted 43.3 hours per week to his sport).


5 Marc Edelman, Note, Reevaluating Amateurism Standards in Men’s College Basketball, 35 U. MICH. J. L. REFORM 861, 864 (2002); see also Players: 0; Colleges: $10,000,000,000, supra note 4 and accompanying text (explaining that “[a]cross all sports, college athletics revenues are
Nevertheless, opponents of “pay for play” cite to numerous problems that they believe will emerge from lifting the NCAA’s “no pay” rules. Among these problems, opponents argue, is that granting college athletes the legal status of “employees” would convert the athletes’ tax-exempt scholarships into taxable income—a result that may offset any economic benefits of “pay for play.”

This article explains why a “pay for play” model of college sports would not necessarily require college athletes to pay taxes on their educational scholarships. Part I of this article discusses the economic and legal landscape of big-time college sports, and introduces the fallacious legal argument that “pay for play” would saddle college athletes with substantial tax liability related to their educational scholarships. Part II provides a brief primer on the U.S. tax code—exploring sections of the code that may allow for paid college athletes to enjoy a tax-free education. Finally, Part III explores how, with proper tax planning, colleges may provide their athletes with bona fide employment contracts that are unlikely to risk the tax-exempt status of the athletes’ college scholarships.
I. THE CHANGING ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF BIG-TIME COLLEGE SPORTS

A. Historic Treatment of U.S. College Athletes

The college sports industry represents a more than eleven billion dollar U.S. enterprise. At present, over fifty U.S. colleges generate upwards of seventy million dollars per year in athletic revenues. Meanwhile, twenty-eight colleges generate annual athletic revenues that exceed $100 million. Most colleges with big-time sports programs focus their efforts on generating revenues in two sports: football and men’s basketball. In these sports, the star athletes devote upwards of forty hours per week to team travel, play, and practice.

---


12 See 2015–16 NCAA Finances, supra note 11.

13 See id. Not all college athletic programs are profitable, and, according to one source, public universities have “pumped more than $10.3 billion in mandatory student fees and other subsidies into their sports programs.” See Brad Wolverton et al., Sports at Any Cost, HUFFINGTON POST (Nov. 15, 2015, 8:00 PM), http://projects.huffingtonpost.com/ncaa/sports-at-any-cost [https://perma.cc/CWA3-5KAQ].


15 See Edelman, supra note 2, at 77 (noting that the typical Division I college football player devotes on average over forty hours per week to his sport—more time than the typical U.S. worker spends practicing his profession); see also LeRoy, supra note 2, at 1099 (noting that “a self-study performed by the NCAA in 2011” found that “Division I [college] football players [devoted] an average of 43.3 hours per week to their sport”).
If U.S. colleges were for-profit entities, the most successful football and men’s basketball programs would produce high shareholder distributions. If U.S. colleges were for-profit entities, the most successful football and men’s basketball programs would produce high shareholder distributions.16 Because the NCAA consists of exclusively non-profit colleges, however, the collegiate sports enterprise operates subject to a “non-distribution constraint.” This means that colleges with big-time football and men’s basketball programs either reinvest their revenues into other college programs, or they allocate their revenues as windfall payments to quasi-shareholders such as school administrators, athletic directors, and coaches.17

Given the revenues brought in by these programs, one might expect colleges to allocate some of their athletic revenues to the athletes. Nevertheless, the NCAA Principle of Amateurism disallows colleges from paying athletes and threatens to ban any NCAA member college that engages in “pay for play.”20 Thus, pursuant to the NCAA’s bylaws, no NCAA member

16 See 2015–16 NCAA Finances, supra note 11 (showing total revenues and net revenues of big-time college athletic departments, after the subsidies to cover the costs of operating non-revenue sports).

17 Hobson & Rich, supra note 14 (quoting sports economist Dan Rascher about how the lack of shareholders contribute to college athletic departments’ spending patterns); Gordon Winston, Why Can’t a College Be More Like a Firm, CHANGE, May 1997, at 34 (discussing the impact of the non-distribution restraint in higher education); cf. Berger v. Nat’l Collegiate Athletic Ass’n, 843 F.3d 285, 289 (7th Cir. 2016) (describing the NCAA as “a member-driven, unincorporated association of 1121 colleges and universities. It is divided into three divisions—Division I, II, and III—based roughly on the size of the schools and their athletic programs”).

18 Marc Edelman, The Future of Amateurism After Antitrust Scrutiny: Why a Win for the Plaintiffs in the NCAA Student-Athlete Name & Likeness Licensing Litigation Will Not Lead to the Demise of College Sports, 92 OR. L. REV. 1019, 1031 (2014); see also Nicholas Fram & T. Ward Frampton, A Union of Amateurs: A Legal Blueprint to Reshape Big-Time College Athletics, 60 BUFF. L. REV. 1003, 1020 (2012) (“Unable to offer financial inducements to players, athletic departments invest heavily in marquee coaches, whose reputations can ensure the recruitment of top-level talent.”); Ellen J. Staurowsky, A Radical Proposal: Title IX Has No Role in College Sport Pay-For-Play Discussions, 22 MARQ. SPORTS L. REV. 575, 578 (2012) (“While college-player labor costs are essentially zero, compensation packages for top-tier college football and men’s basketball coaches are competitive or exceed those of coaches working in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and NFL”). See generally Hobson & Rich, supra note 14 (explaining that “[c]olleges generally treat athletic departments as stand-alone organizations, free to spend every dollar they earn”).

19 See Players: 0; Colleges: $10,000,000,000, supra note 4 (highlighting the unusual nature of the college sports business model in the United States, and the treatment of college athletes as celebrities despite not allowing them to “share the fruits of their own [labor]”); cf. Maxwell Strachan, Mitch Daniels Says NCAA Needs Serious Reform to Head Off Congress and Courts, HUFFINGTON POST (May 13, 2015), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/13/mitch-daniels-ncaa-division-i-sports_n_7274248.html [https://perma.cc/PN6L-3XH3] (explaining that the President of Purdue University, Mitch Daniels, “believes the term ‘college basketball’” is a “misnomer” and that the teams are really “pseudo-professional teams attached to universities”).

20 See NAT’L COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC ASS’N, 2017–2018 DIVISION I MANUAL § 2.9 (2017) (stating that “[s]tudent-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived”); see also Edelman, supra note 2, at 64–65 (explaining that “the NCAA is ‘the dominant
college would dare publicly offer any financial benefits to its athletes beyond a tax-exempt scholarship to cover the costs of tuition, books, and room and board.21

**B. Three Approaches to Reforming College Sports**

Based on the colossal disparity between the revenues derived from college sports and the college athletes’ compensation, there is an emerging movement to reform the financial aspects of collegiate sports.22 Some advocates of reform have called for the NCAA to make voluntary changes to its Principle of Amateurism.23 Others have explored the potential for players to unionize under federal labor laws.24 Meanwhile, a third group of reformers has called for athletes to challenge the NCAA’s “no pay” rules under federal antitrust laws.25
1. Voluntary NCAA Reform

Thus far, attempts to reform the NCAA without resorting to litigation have achieved limited to moderate success. A recent example of such reform was the NCAA’s decision to abandon its rules limiting the amount of food that colleges may provide to their athletes. This reform emerged after University of Connecticut men’s basketball player Shabazz Napier exposed the hypocrisy of the NCAA’s rules on food limits to the media just hours before playing in the 2014 men’s basketball national championship game. Napier’s statement that he had experienced “hungry nights” at school went viral due, in part, to the absurdity of the NCAA earning nearly one billion dollars from men’s basketball television revenues, while limiting how much food colleges may provide to their basketball players.

Another voluntary NCAA reform was the NCAA’s 2011 decision to increase the maximum permissible scholarship amounts for college athletes by two thousand dollars—a decision that somewhat reduced the shortfall between the NCAA’s scholarship maximum and the actual cost of attending college. Some commentators attribute this change to social activism by college athletes and more liberal-minded coaches. Others, however, at-

---

26 See infra notes 27–32 and accompanying text.
30 See NCAA Panel Approves Major Changes, ESPN (Oct. 27, 2011), http://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/_/id/7156548/ncaa-panel-approves-major-scholarship-rules-changes [https://perma.cc/6Y87-AH9F] (discussing the NCAA’s decision to allow conferences to vote to provide college athletes with two thousand dollars in “spending money” in addition to their scholarships, and the recognition by Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany that this amount still leaves college athletes with a shortfall).
31 See Bruce Pascoe, UA Athletes Can Expect About $1,000, ARIZ. DAILY STAR (Oct. 28, 2011), http://tucson.com/sports/college/wildcats/ua-athletes-can-expect-about/article_952dbdaf-3900-5b02-b323-14cc61ec2d7d.html [https://perma.cc/YS4T-7LNZ] (explaining that in the days leading up to the NCAA’s favorable vote to increase the permissible scholarship amount for college athletes
tribute the change more to the desire of elite colleges to compete more favorably in college athlete recruiting markets.  

2. The Unionizing of College Athletes

A second approach to improving the financial status of college athletes entails the unionizing of athletes for the purposes of collective bargaining over the mandatory terms and conditions of employment—including hours, wages, and general working conditions. The most notable attempt to unionize college athletes occurred in 2014, when the starting quarterback of Northwestern University’s men’s football team, Kain Colter, attempted to convince his teammates to unionize. Region 13 of the National Labor Relations Board (“NLRB”) ultimately recognized that Northwestern University football players were “employees” under the National Labor Relations Act. Nevertheless, the Board Commissioners refused to assert jurisdiction by the lesser of two thousand dollars or the amount needed to meet the full cost of college attendance, many college athletes, including University of Arizona wide receiver David Roberts, signed a petition requesting a $3,200 increase; see also Jon Nyatawa & Rich Kaipust, Nebraska Football Notes: Pelini in Favor of NCAA’s Actions to Assist Athletes, OMAHA WORLD-HERALD, Oct. 28, 2011, 2011 WLNR 22250322 (discussing University of Nebraska football coach Bo Pelini’s support for increasing the scholarship limits for college athletes).

See generally Elton Alexander, NCAA Will Allow Schools to Provide Spending Money to Student-Athletes, PLAIN DEALER (Oct. 28, 2011, 5:01AM), http://www.cleveland.com/osu/2011/10/ncaa_approves_spending_money_f.html [https://perma.cc/2LET-NL58] (explaining how the two thousand dollar scholarship increase is a neutral, or perhaps even positive, change from the perspective of Ohio State University—a school with an athletic department that operates at a surplus and wishes to continue recruiting the most elite college football and men’s basketball players).

See Marc Edelman, The Future of College Athlete Players Unions: Lessons Learned from Northwestern University and Potential Next Steps in the College Athletes’ Rights Movement, 38 CARDOZO L. REV. 1627, 1629 (2017) (explaining that “Congress passed the [National Labor Relations Act] in May 1935 to grant private employees the right to self-organize and engage in . . . concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection”) (internal quotations omitted); see also First Nat’l Maint. Corp. v. N.L.R.B., 452 U.S. 666, 674–75 (1981) (“Although parties are free to bargain about any legal subject, Congress has limited the mandate or duty to bargain to matters of ‘wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment.’”) (citing 29 U.S.C. § 158(d) (2012)).

See Edelman, supra note 33, at 1635 (discussing the efforts to create a college athlete players’ union among Northwestern University grant-in-aid football players).

See Nw. Univ. & Coll. Athletes Players Ass’n (Nw. Univ. I), No. 13-RC-121359, 2014 WL 1246914, at *1 (N.L.R.B., Region 13 Mar. 26, 2014), rev’d on other grounds, Nw. Univ. II, 2015 WL 4882656, at *1 (Aug. 17, 2015). Since the NLRB decision, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit rejected classifying athletes on the University of Pennsylvania women’s track and field team as employees for purposes of the right to minimum wage under the Fair Labor Standards Act. See Berger, 843 F.3d at 291–93. Although the Berger decision involved the Fair Labor Standards Act and not the National Labor Relations Act, the ruling is somewhat troubling with regard to the future classification of big-time college athletes as employees because the majority opinion references all “student athletes,” and not just those participating in women’s track and
over these particular football players due to a concern that doing so would create labor instability throughout the Big Ten athletic conference. 36

The NLRB’s decision to deny jurisdiction over the Northwestern University football players, however, does not foreclose the possibility of the NLRB asserting jurisdiction over a different bargaining unit of revenue-generating college athletes. 37 One alternative bargaining unit that might receive more favorable treatment from the NLRB would include all of the football or men’s basketball players in an athletic conference that includes multiple private colleges. 38 Another potential bargaining unit could include all of the private Football Bowl Subdivision (“FBS”) football and Division I men’s basketball players across the entire United States. 39

3. Reform Ordered by Antitrust Law

Finally, some college athletes have attempted to improve their economic status by challenging the NCAA’s “no-pay” rules as illegal restraints of trade under the Sherman Antitrust Act. 40 To date, there have been three notable labor-side antitrust lawsuits against the NCAA that seek to change the financial relationship between colleges and their football and men’s basketball players. 41 The first lawsuit, O’Bannon v. National Collegiate Athletic Ass’n, was brought by the plaintiffs in 2009 and alleged that the NCAA’s members violated Section 1 of the Sherman Act by conspiring “to fix the price of former student athletes’ images at zero and to boycott former stu-

Id. at 293. Judge Hamilton’s concurring opinion in Berger seems to take a more realistic view, suggesting as a note of caution that the non-treatment of the University of Pennsylvania women’s track team as employees may be based in part on that “Penn does not offer athletic scholarships” and “track and field is not a ‘revenue’ sport at Penn or any other school.” Id. at 294 (Hamilton, J., concurring).

36 Nw. Univ. II, 2015 WL 4882656, at *5. More broadly than these particular qualms related to the nature of Northwestern University’s conference affiliation, the NLRB cautioned that “of the roughly 125 colleges and universities that participate in FBS football, all but 17 are state-run institutions,” that lie outside the scope of the NLRB’s jurisdiction. Id.

37 See Edelman, supra note 33, at 1643.

38 See id. (citing Nw. Univ. II, 2015 WL 4882656, at *6).

39 Id. at 1649–50. A third potential bargaining unit might include all FBS football and Division I men’s basketball players at both public and private colleges, operating under the theory that the NCAA is a joint employer of all college athletes and thus even public colleges fall within the NLRB’s jurisdiction. See id. Nevertheless, the Seventh Circuit in Berger seemed to reject the notion that the NCAA was a joint employer of college athletes. See Berger, 843 F.3d at 293 (holding that the relationship between University of Pennsylvania college athletes and the NCAA was too attenuated to establish employer liability).

40 See infra notes 42–51 and accompanying text.

41 See infra notes 42–51 and accompanying text.
dent athletes in the collegiate licensing market.” 42 The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld the lower court’s injunction that prevented the NCAA from sanctioning colleges that provide their athletes with scholarships valued at up to the full cost of their college attendance. 43

A second lawsuit, Alston v. National Collegiate Athletic Ass’n, was filed in 2014 and alleged that the NCAA and its five largest athletic conferences conspired to violate antitrust laws by capping the value of college athlete scholarships below the athletes’ actual cost of attendance. 44 The plaintiffs in Alston sought not only to enjoin NCAA member colleges from limiting scholarship amounts (a remedy similar to the remedy requested in O’Bannon), but also to receive damages from the NCAA for past antitrust wrongdoing. 45 In February of 2017, the class of plaintiffs in Alston and the NCAA reached a historic settlement. 46

A third antitrust lawsuit, Jenkins v. National Collegiate Athletic Ass’n, was filed in 2014 and sought to fully overturn the NCAA’s “no pay” rules that “plac[e] a ceiling on the compensation that may be paid to [college] athletes for their services.” 47 In contrast to O’Bannon and Alston, the Jen-

---


43 O’Bannon v. Nat’l Collegiate Athletic Ass’n (O’Bannon II), 802 F.3d 1049, 1079 (9th Cir. 2015). Prior to the decision, the NCAA capped the amount of athletic scholarships at member schools at a “full grant in aid” rather than “cost of attendance”—leaving college athletes with between a $2000 and $6000 annual shortfall resulting from transportation and reasonable personal expenses. See Fram & Frampton, supra note 18, at 1022 (describing the shortfall at some institutions as “more than $6000”); William B. Gould IV et al., Full Court Press: Northwestern University, A New Challenge to the NCAA, 35 LOY. L.A. ENT. L. REV. 1, 45 (2014) (estimating the shortfall at nearly two thousand dollars).


45 Alston Complaint, supra note 44 at 106–07, 115; Sievert, supra note 44.

46 Michael McCann, NCAA Reaches Settlement in Grant-in-Aid Class Action, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (Feb. 5, 2017), https://www.si.com/college-football/2017/02/04/shawne-alston-grant-aid-class-action-lawsuit-ncaa-settlement https://web.archive.org/web/20170217035847/https://www.si.com/college-football/2017/02/04/shawne-alston-grant-aid-class-action-lawsuit-ncaa-settlement]. The settlement would require the NCAA to pay a total of $208.7 million to a class of approximately forty thousand former Division I football, men’s basketball and women’s basketball players who have played since March 2010. Id. A class member who played one of those sports for four years could expect to receive, on average, $6,763. Id.

47 Complaint at 2, Jenkins v. Nat’l Collegiate Athletic Ass’n, No. 3:14-cv-01678 (D.N.J. Mar. 17, 2014) [hereinafter Jenkins Complaint]. The suit was later re-filed in the Northern District of
kins lawsuit did not seek to simply recover the true costs of attending college. Rather, the lawsuit is attempting to create an entirely free labor market for NCAA colleges to hire athletes. In other words, the Jenkins lawsuit seeks to obtain a labor market to recruit college athletes comparable to the market that already exists to hire non-unionized college professors and non-unionized research assistants. If successful, this would mark a substantial departure from past practices in college sports.

C. Political, Media, and Academic Perspectives on the Tax Implications of College Sports Reform

Among the many public policy issues that emerge from transitioning college sports into a “pay for play” model, one issue that has received substantial attention involves the tax implications that “pay for play” may have on college athletes’ scholarships. Not surprisingly, some of the staunchest opponents of “pay for play” have attempted to use the purported negative tax consequences as a red herring in the argument about whether college athletes deserve to share in the fruits of their labor.

Among politicians, one of the most outspoken critics of “pay for play” is U.S. Senator Richard Burr (R–North Carolina), a former scholarship football player at Wake Forest University who believes the United Steelworkers Union pressured “misguided college football players” into seeking to unionize. Senator Burr recently penned a letter to the Internal Revenue


48 See Jenkins Complaint, supra note 47, at 1–4.

49 Id. The argument advanced in the Jenkins suit mimics one that I had advanced in a law review article in 2013. See Edelman, supra note 2, at 64 (concluding that “[i]t is not just the outer fringes of the NCAA rules that violate antitrust law: it is the whole shebang”).


51 See Thein, supra note 6.

52 See, e.g., Darren Rovell, Players Could Get Big Tax Bill, ESPN (Mar. 27, 2014), http://www.espn.com/espn/print?id=10683398 (quoting NCAA President Mark Emmert as stating that, despite the ongoing litigation against the NCAA’s no-pay rules, “[o]ne thing that sets the fundamental tone is there’s very few members and, virtually no university president, that think it’s a good idea to convert student-athletes into paid employees”).

53 See 160 Cong. Rec. S2362–66 (providing the extensive statements of Senator Lamar Alexander (R-Tennessee) and Senator Richard Burr (R-North Carolina) in opposition to athletes unionizing and “pay for play” in college sports).
Service (‘‘IRS’’), arguing that any college athlete who obtains the classification of an ‘‘employee’’ should immediately lose the tax-exempt status of his college scholarship.\textsuperscript{55} John Koskinen, the Commissioner of the IRS, however, disagreed.\textsuperscript{56}

Similarly, among sports journalists, ESPN writer Darren Rovell has noted that ‘‘pay for play’’ could harm the tax-exempt status of college athletes’ scholarships.\textsuperscript{57} In one ESPN article, Rovell quoted an accountant in private practice for the proposition that if college athletes were to be reclassified as employees, ‘‘[t]he IRS may be able to make the argument that the scholarship is really payment for services . . . and is now taxable to the athlete.’’\textsuperscript{58} The accountant’s opinion, however, focused only on a single section of the tax code and not on the code in its entirety.\textsuperscript{59}

Meanwhile, among college professors, University of Kentucky Education Policy professor John R. Thelin has argued that if college athletes were to receive salaries rather than scholarships, the athletes would become worse off economically because they would lose the ability to obtain college tuition on a tax-exempt basis.\textsuperscript{60} Similarly, professors Kathryn Kisska-Schulze and Adam Epstein claim in a recent Akron Law Review article that the IRS and courts ‘‘may categorize at least some scholarship athletes as employees of their institutions in the future, which may cultivate a new era in the taxing of qualified scholarships under federal income tax law.’’\textsuperscript{61} None of these conclusions, however, consider the full nuance of the tax code.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{55} See Letter from John A. Koskinen, IRS Comm’r, to Richard Burr, U.S. Senator, \textit{supra} note 7 (explaining and rejecting Senator Burr’s perspective); \textit{see also} Press Release, U.S. Senate Comm. on Health, Educ., Labor & Pensions, \textit{supra} note 7 (referencing Senator Burr’s college football experience at Wake Forest University); Lawmakers Ask for Northwestern Football Union Ruling to Be Overturned, \textit{LEGAL MONITOR WORLDWIDE}, Jul. 4, 2014, 2014 WLNR 18206332 (discussing amicus brief signed by six Republican lawmakers, including Senator Burr, seeking to convince the Commissioners of the NLRB to overturn Region 13’s ruling that the Northwestern University football players constituted employees under labor law).


\textsuperscript{57} See Rovell, \textit{supra} note 53 (arguing that even though Region 13 of the NLRB granted jurisdiction over the Northwestern University football players, ‘‘potential tax implications alone could kill the idea’’).

\textsuperscript{58} See \textit{id.} (quoting tax accountant Garrett Higgins).

\textsuperscript{59} See \textit{id.} (noting that the tax analysis was exclusively based on § 117 of the U.S. tax code, which relates to ‘‘qualified scholarships,’’ while there are several sections of the tax code that arguably apply).

\textsuperscript{60} Thelin, \textit{supra} note 6.


\textsuperscript{62} \textit{See infra} notes 62–148 and accompanying text (discussing sections of the tax code that were ignored entirely by the aforementioned analyses).
II. A BASIC PRIMER ON FEDERAL INCOME TAX LAW

Despite the simple, widespread argument that paying college athletes makes educational scholarships taxable, a review of the U.S. tax code indicates that numerous different code sections may direct otherwise.63 Section A of this Part will discuss U.S. tax law generally and explain the fundamental premise of “gross income.”64 Section B of this Part will explain the various reductions an individual may take from their “gross income.”65

A. An Introduction to U.S. Tax Law and the Definitions of “Gross Income” and Taxable Income

Before the IRS can compute one’s tax liability, the Internal Revenue Code (“IRC”) first requires a computation of one’s “gross income.”66 The IRC defines “gross income” to include any “income from whatever source derived”—irrespective of whether the income is provided in the form of cash or property.67

The tax code then lowers one’s taxable income based upon three types of reductions: exclusions, deductions, and credits.68 A tax exclusion reduces the amount that a taxpayer must report as gross income.69 For example, the code allows a taxpayer to exclude certain types of in-kind benefits from gross income because they are difficult to measure.70 Meanwhile, taxpayers may exclude other types of benefits, such as 401(k) retirement plans, as a means to further a public policy that promotes retirement savings.71

Similarly, a tax deduction is an expense that an individual may subtract from his or her “gross income.”72 Taxpayers typically have a choice between accepting a “standard deduction” or accepting an aggregate of all of their line item deductions.73 Some examples of deductible line-items include property taxes and mortgage interest, state and local income taxes, charitable contri-
butions, and medical expenses not covered by insurance to the extent that they exceed a particular threshold.\footnote{See I.R.C. §§ 163–164, 170, 213; Lindquist, supra note 68.}

Finally, a tax credit is a “dollar-for-dollar reduction of an individual’s tax liability.”\footnote{Lindquist, supra note 68. See generally What Is the Earned Income Tax Credit?, TAX POL’Y CTR. http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/what-earned-income-tax-credit-eitc [https://perma.cc/P56E-JSQ6] (last visited Aug. 16, 2016).} A tax credit is different from a tax deduction in that “[i]f the tax credit is refundable, individuals can receive its full amount even if they do not have any income tax to offset.”\footnote{Lindquist, supra note 68. Id.} Many tax credits, however, are limited to individuals with earned income below a certain threshold.\footnote{77 Id. \footnote{See Jennifer Woods, The Top 10 Tax Credits That Should Be on Your Radar, CNBC (Apr. 11, 2016), http://www.cnbc.com/2016/04/11/the-top-10-tax-credits-that-should-be-on-your-radar.html [https://perma.cc/6JK6-6KE8].} For example the earned income tax credit “is geared toward people with low to moderate income levels.”\footnote{TAX POL’Y CTR., EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT PARAMETERS, 1975–2016 (2016), http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/taxfacts/content/PDF/historical_eitc_parameters.pdf [https://perma.cc/Y9P2-L88P]; Woods, supra note 78.} In 2016, the credit allowed for a tax savings of up to $6,269, with this amount varying based on income level, filing basis, and number of dependents.\footnote{See infra notes 81–148 and accompanying text.}

B. Notable Reductions from “Gross Income”

When reviewing the entirety of the U.S. tax code, there are several possible ways for individuals to realize a tax savings on either their free receipt or purchase of an education.\footnote{See infra notes 81–148 and accompanying text.}

1. Section 117: Qualified Scholarship Exemption

First, Section 117 of the IRC is the section of the code that college athletes traditionally have relied upon when electing not to declare their scholarships as gross income.\footnote{See I.R.C. § 117(a)–(d) (qualified scholarships); see also Rev. Rul. 77-263, 1977-2 C.B. 47 (concluding that recipients of athletic scholarships do not need to pay income tax on these scholarships as long as the scholarships are guaranteed irrespective of whether the recipient ultimately chooses to play his or her sport).} This section of the tax code excludes from gross income the receipt of “qualified scholarships,” which are contingency-free educational grants and fellowships.\footnote{See I.R.C. § 117(a)–(d); cf Kisska-Schulze & Epstein, supra note 61, at 783 (explaining that the “qualified scholarship” exemption for gross income first appeared in a U.S. tax code in 1954).} To constitute a “qualified scholar-
ship,” a particular payment or in-kind benefit must cover the tuition and fees required for college enrollment, books, supplies or equipment. In addition, the scholarship’s primary purpose must be “to further the education and training of the recipient in his individual capacity” rather than in the recipient’s employee capacity.

The outer contours of what constitutes a “qualified scholarship” have emerged from federal case law. Most notably, the U.S. Supreme Court held in its 1969 decision Bingler v. Johnson that a scholarship provided by one’s employer subject to the express promise to work for the employer upon graduation did not constitute a “qualified scholarship.” This is because a scholarship of this nature includes an express condition to perform contemporaneous or subsequent work for an employer in exchange for the free education. In other words, the underlying scholarship is more akin to a contractual arrangement than a gift.

---

83 See I.R.C. § 117(a)–(c) (noting that the scholarship amount may not include room and board); see also Justin Morehouse, When Play Becomes Work: Are College Athletes Employees?, TAX ANALYSTS (Sep. 22, 2014), http://www.taxanalysts.org/content/when-play-becomes-work-are-college-athletes-employees [https://perma.cc/9B73-8D6F] (noting that, in 1986, “Congress explicitly limited the scope of qualified expenses to deny the exclusion for amounts received as room, board, and other living expenses”).

84 Treas. Reg. § 1.117-4(c) (as amended in 1985). According to at least one scholar on the topic, it is believed that the underlying rationale to this distinction was that, in the early days of the tax code, “most scholarships [outside of the employment context] were given by local business leagues, charitable organizations, and education institutions themselves” and thus these scholarships were perhaps seen as akin to gifts. Charlotte Crane, Scholarships and the Federal Income Tax Base, 28 HARV. J. ON LEGIS. 63, 67 (1991). Although the nature of many scholarships is quite different today, the general treatment of scholarships has not changed because this tax deduction encourages the pursuit of education, and, furthermore, excluding such amounts from taxation is consistent with a general social welfare policy of “treat[ing] those individuals receiving scholarships equal to those receiving educational advantages from their environment.” Id. at 75, 103.

85 See infra notes 86–109 and accompanying text.

86 Bingler v. Johnson, 394 U.S. 741, 757 (1969) (noting that, under a predecessor version of the tax code, that under the taxpayer’s scholarship, the taxpayer, who was an engineer at Westinghouse, was “obligated to return to Westinghouse’s employ for a substantial period of time”).

87 Id.; see also Crane, supra note 84, at 104 (explaining that, based on the interpretation in Bingler and subsequent cases, “[n]o longer can any services be made an express condition of scholarships exempt under section 117” and “[h]owever, the statute sets forth no standard to apply when there is no such express condition and a student both works for and seeks scholarship aid from a single institution”); cf. id. at 105 (concluding that “in many instances, the line between merit and services can be a fine one, even at the undergraduate level” and pointing to the engagement in an extracurricular activity in exchange for a scholarship as perhaps, in the author’s opinion, blurring the line).

Similarly, in 1969, in *Proskey v. Commissioner*, the U.S. Tax Court explored the outermost limits of the definition of a “qualified scholarship” in the context of a resident physician at a university hospital. In *Proskey*, the court held that a cash stipend the University of Michigan had paid to one of its resident physicians was taxable under the U.S. tax code because the physician’s primary responsibilities—diagnosing patients and prescribing treatment—were not related to his own education. Although the U.S. Tax Court recognized that the resident physician had teaching responsibilities at the University of Michigan’s medical school, these teaching responsibilities were performed under the “constant direction and control” of the resident physician’s hospital, and the resident physician “was not free to pursue studies or research of his choice.”

The previous year, in *Zolnay v. Commissioner*, the U.S. Tax Court held that the annual cash payment of $9,600 from a university laboratory to an Ohio State University Ph.D student who performed lab research constituted compensation for services and was not an excludable scholarship or fellowship under the U.S. tax code. In *Zolnay*, the court noted that the laboratory worker was paid a salary on par with university professors, and that he had worked in the laboratory for upwards of forty hours per week—far longer than was needed to meet any obligations related to his Ph.D. program. Furthermore, the laboratory worker’s payment came in the form of cash, and his pay was not allocated to any direct costs pertaining to Ohio State University. The laboratory worker even continued to perform the same work and receive the same paycheck after he withdrew from the university.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the court rulings in *Bingler*, *Proskey*, and *Zolnay*, a 1977 IRS ruling concluded that under the “student-athlete” amateurism model, “[t]he value of athletic scholarships, which may not exceed expenses for tuition, fees, room, board, and necessary supplies . . . is excludable from the recipient’s gross income” as long as the scholarship offer remains binding irrespective of whether the student ultimately chooses to

---

90 See id. at 923 (explaining further that the University of Michigan Hospital was “not operated primarily as an institution for teaching”).
91 Id. at 924.
92 See 49 T.C. 389, 399 (1968).
93 See id. at 397–98.
94 See generally id. (explaining that taxpayer’s use of his stipend for every day financial support, unrelated to his supposed studies, cut in favor the IRS’s argument the stipends were compensation for work).
95 See id. at 398.
participate in his sport. The ruling further explains that if an “athletic scholarship” was crafted to make scholarship money contingent upon the athlete actually competing in his sport or fulfilling some other legal requirement, then the IRS would instead treat the “scholarship” as a quid pro quo, and thus it would not be excludable from “gross income.”

There are several ways to reconcile the favorable tax treatment of athletic scholarships by the IRS with the adverse court rulings in Bingler, Proskey and Zolnay. First, as articulated by the IRS, traditional athletic scholarships at the time were perceived as binding even if an athlete were to quit his team. Thus, the athletic scholarships in question were not tied to performing in any particular athletic activity. By contrast, in Bingler, Proskey, and Zolnay, the recipients’ scholarships were contingent upon either contemporaneous or future work. Thus, the scholarship came far closer to representing one side of a quid pro quo.

In addition to the difference in the binding nature of the scholarships, recipients of college athletic scholarships generally maintain full discretion to choose their courses based on personal interests. Indeed, NCAA Division I athletes have held majors as varied as aeronautics, linguistics, and medical anthropology. By contrast, the scholarship recipients in Bingler

97 Id. Since the 1977 ruling, many colleges have moved to one-year scholarships that are not renewed if an athlete quits, plays poorly, or is injured. Even absent a “pay for play” model, these scholarships may reasonably fail under the test for “qualified scholarships” under § 117 of the tax code. See Jon Solomon, Schools Can Give Out 4-Year Athletic Scholarships, but Many Don’t, CBS SPORTS (Sept. 16, 2014), http://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/schools-can-give-out-4-year-athletic-scholarships-but-many-dont [https://web.archive.org/web/20160612091032/http://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/schools-can-give-out-4-year-athletic-scholarships-but-many-dont] (explaining that for many years leading up to 2012 the NCAA banned multi-year scholarships, and, since 2012, the NCAA reinstated multi-year scholarships but have made them optional for member colleges).
98 See infra notes 99–109 and accompanying text.
100 See id.
101 See Bingler, 394 U.S. at 757; Proskey, 51 T.C. at 923; Zolnay, 49 T.C. at 399.
102 See generally supra note 97 and accompanying text (explaining that a quid pro quo is often associated with a contractual arrangement).
and *Proskey* had limited, if any, discretion in choosing their courses.\footnote{See *Bingler*, 394 U.S. at 742 (noting that the scholarship at issue in *Bingler* was limited in availability to “postgraduate study in engineering, physics, or mathematics”—all subjects that would relate to employment subsequent to completing the program); *Proskey*, 51 T.C. at 923 (concluding that the “the broad scope of the services [petitioner] was required to perform” was an “important indication that petitioner’s activities at University Hospital . . . were geared not to study and research but to the operational needs of University Hospital”).} The subject matter was determined by their employer for the purpose of improving the services that the scholarship recipients provided to their employer.\footnote{See generally *Bingler*, 394 U.S. at 742 (noting the subject matter related to the recipient’s would-be engineering job at Westinghouse upon program completion).}

Finally, the athletic scholarships described in the IRS’s 1977 ruling provided athletes with in-kind educational and living benefits rather than cash payments.\footnote{See Rev. Rul. 77-263, 1977-2 C.B. 47 (describing the traditional athletic scholarship provided directly by a college to its athletes, primarily in the form of in-kind benefits such as free tuition).} By contrast, the payments in *Proskey* and *Zolnay* were cash payments.\footnote{See *Proskey*, 51 T.C. at 919 (describing the disputed “scholarship” related to a cash stipend that the recipient taxpayer wished to exclude from gross income, rather than the receipt of in-kind benefits); *Zolnay*, 49 T.C. at 389 (describing the disputed “scholarship” as a $9,600 payment from the university’s Electro-Science laboratory).} While the U.S. tax code does not expressly delineate between in-kind benefits and the receipt of cash, the former is implicitly preferred for tax purposes because it is less likely that in-kind benefits would serve as a disguise for additional salary.\footnote{See *Proskey*, 51 T.C. at 919 (explaining the cash nature of taxpayer’s “stipend” lent credibility to the argument the cash was compensation for services).}

2. Section 127: Exemption for Educational Assistance Paid by Employer

Additionally, § 127 of the IRC allows employees to exclude up to $5,250 from their gross income per year in educational assistance, paid by an employer toward one’s undergraduate education, if the employer maintains a written educational assistance plan.\footnote{See generally *Bingler*, 394 U.S. at 742 (noting that the subject matter related to the recipient’s would-be engineering job at Westinghouse upon program completion).} Under this section of the tax code, employees may use the $5,250 exclusion amount, unless otherwise restricted by the company’s educational assistance plan, toward tuition and fees, as well as books, supplies, and equipment.\footnote{See I.R.C. § 127; see also Crane, supra note 84, at 108 (“An employer can provide up to $5,250 of educational assistance each calendar year to an employee if the assistance is provided under a nondiscriminatory program.”); Stuart Lazar, *Schooling Congress: The Current Landscape of the Tax Treatment of Higher Education Expenses and a Framework for Reform*, 2010 Mich. St. L. Rev. 1047, 1087–88 (noting that nothing in § 127 precludes taxpayers from deducting amounts exceeding the $5,250 threshold so long as such expenses “qualify as a working condition fringe benefit”).} An employee may qualify for a § 127 exemption irrespective of whether the intended course of
study is job-related. However, the § 127 exemption does not include any tax exemption for “education involving sports, games, hobbies (unless job-related), meals, lodging or transportation.”

3. Section 132: Exempted Fringe Benefits

Section 132 of the IRC, meanwhile, excludes from “gross income” any fringe benefits offered by employers that constitute one of the following categories: (1) no-additional-cost services; (2) qualified employee discounts; (3) working condition fringe benefits; and (4) de minimis fringe benefits.

A “no-additional-cost service” includes any service provided by an employer to an employee if “(1) such service is offered for sale to customers in the ordinary course of the line of business of the employer in which the employee is performing services, and (2) the employer incurs no substantial additional cost (including forgone revenue) in providing such service to the employee . . . .” One example of a “no-additional-cost service” is an airline carrier’s policy of “allowing employees to fly free-of-charge on flights having empty seats.” Other examples of no-additional-cost services include “excess capacity services” such as hotel accommodations, commercial bus or train tickets, use of entertainment facilities, and free communication services for employees of the telephone company.

A “qualified employee discount,” meanwhile, includes:

[A]ny employee discount with respect to qualified property or services to the extent such discount does not exceed (A) in the case of property, the gross profit percentage of the price at which

---

112 See Lazar, supra note 110, at 1088–89.
114 I.R.C. § 132 (also exempting, under this section of the tax code, qualified transportation fringe benefits, qualified moving expense reimbursement, qualified retirement planning services, and qualified military base realignment and closure fringe benefits); see also Bertrand M. Harding Jr., Taxation, in COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION 10–11 (2013) (discussing the application of § 132 in the context of higher education); Wayne M. Gazur, Assessing Internal Revenue Code Section 132 After Twenty Years, 25 VA. TAX REV. 977, 980–81 (2006) (explaining that “[a] leading dictionary in current use identifies the term ‘fringe benefit’ as of U.S. origin and defines it as ‘a perquisite or belief of some kind provided by an employer to supplement a money wage or salary’”) (citing 8 OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 200 (2d ed. 1989)).
115 I.R.C. § 132(b)(1)–(2).
117 See WILLIAM P. STRENG & MICKEY R. DAVIS, TAX PLANNING FOR RETIREMENT ¶ 6.03 (2017) (internal quotations omitted); INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., supra note 113, at 18.
the property is being offered by the employer to customers, or (B) in the case of services, 20 percent of the price at which the services are being offered by the employer to customers.\textsuperscript{118}

Similarly, a “working condition fringe” consists of “any property or services provided to an employee of the employer to the extent that, if the employee paid for such property of services, such payment would be allowable for deduction [as a trade or business expense or as depreciation].”\textsuperscript{119} For example, according to the 2014 IRS Fringe Benefit Guide, an employee may exempt from his gross income as a “working condition fringe” a free education if the education “improves or develops the job-related capabilities of an employee.”\textsuperscript{120} This may include the receipt of an undergraduate or advanced degree needed to retain one’s job or pay level, as long as the degree does not prepare an employee to enter a new trade or business.\textsuperscript{121}

Finally, a “de minimis fringe” benefit includes “any property or service the value of which is . . . so small as to make accounting for it unreasonable or administratively impracticable.”\textsuperscript{122} For example, dinner money and local transportation fare are two examples of de minimis fringe benefits, as long as the benefits are not provided on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{123} In addition, the IRC specifically includes as a de minimis fringe benefit “the operation by an employer of any eating facility for employees” so long as “such facility is located on or near the business premises of the employer” and “revenue derived from such facility normally equals or exceeds the direct operating costs of such facility.”\textsuperscript{124}
4. Section 119: Meals and Lodging for the Convenience of the Employer

Section 119 of the IRC, meanwhile, allows for an individual to exclude from gross income any “meals and lodging furnished for the convenience of the employer.”125 Under this section of the tax code, meals are excludable in-kind benefits if they are provided “on the employer’s business premises” and “for the employer’s convenience.”126 Similarly, lodging is excludable from wages if the lodging is provided on the employer’s business premises, for the employer’s convenience, and as a condition of employment.127

The IRC does not provide an exclusive list of jobs that allow employees to receive tax-free lodging.128 Nevertheless, the IRS Fringe Benefits Guide lists some common examples of professions where lodging is generally excludable, such as: “park rangers, firefighters or apartment managers.”129 These are all jobs where living in close proximity to one’s work is essential for performing one’s job appropriately.130

5. Section 162(a): Trade or Business Expenses Deduction

Lastly, § 162(a) of the U.S. tax code states that, where an individual pays certain expenses, “[t]here shall be allowed as a [tax] deduction all the ordinary and necessary expenses paid or incurred during the taxable year in carrying on any trade or business.”131 As the U.S. Supreme Court explained in its 1987 decision in Commissioner v. Groetzinger, to constitute “carrying on any trade or business,” an individual “must be involved in the activity with continuity and regularity and . . . the taxpayer’s primary purpose for engaging in the activity must be for income or profit.”132 While a tax deduction for out-of-pocket expenses is not as valuable as the opportunity to exclude in-kind benefits from gross income, § 162(a) still provides meaning-

---

125 See I.R.C. § 119(a)–(b); see also Harding, supra note 114, at 12.
126 INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., supra note 113, at 43.
127 Id. at 47.
128 See id. at 49.
129 Id.
130 See generally id. (explaining examples of when a profession may require someone to live on or near their place of work).
131 I.R.C. § 162(a); see also Kopaigora v. Comm’r, T.C. Summ. Op. 2016-35, 2016 WL 4094723, at *3 (T.C. Aug. 2, 2016) (citing Treas. Reg. § 1.162-5(b)); Ford v. Comm’r, 56 T.C. 1300, 1305 (1971), aff’d, 487 F.2d 1025 (9th Cir. 1973) (per curiam) (explaining how analysis of a business deduction begins by examining whether the taxpayer was engaged in a particular trade or business, and whether the expenditure was directly related to that trade or business); Lazar, supra note 110, at 1053–54 (discussing the implications of § 162(a) in terms of deducting the cost of education as a business expense).
ful benefits for those who are either self-employed or have an employer who does not cover all of their business expenses.\textsuperscript{133}

As a general matter, § 162(a) of the tax code is commonly used to deduct expenses such as one’s home office, business phone and utilities, professional publications, office supplies, and business travels.\textsuperscript{134} Nevertheless, this deduction is also available for educational expenses where the expenses are incurred in connection with carrying on a trade or business, are not required to meet the minimum threshold of a taxpayer’s trade or business, and do not lead to the qualification of a taxpayer in a new trade or business.\textsuperscript{135}

Numerous court decisions have assessed whether, under particular scenarios, individuals may deduct their non-scholarship educational expenses from their taxable income.\textsuperscript{136} For example, in its 1950 decision \textit{Hill v. Commissioner}, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit considered whether a taxpayer who taught high school English in Virginia may deduct from her tax returns the cost of taking summer classes at Columbia University in the subjects of short-story writing and abnormal psychology.\textsuperscript{137} In reaching a favorable conclusion for the taxpayer, the court emphasized that the Virginia State Board of Education required teachers to complete one of several forms of continuing education, and that acquiring college credits falls within those permissible forms.\textsuperscript{138} Thus, the teacher’s coursework at Columbia University represented a good faith trade or business expense.\textsuperscript{139}

Similarly, in 1973, in \textit{Ford v. Commissioner}, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld a U.S. Tax Court decision that allowed an English teacher to deduct the costs related to his one year of graduate studies in

\textsuperscript{133} See infra notes 134–148 and accompanying text.


\textsuperscript{135} See Lazar, supra note 110, at 1054 (internal citations and quotations omitted); see also Kopaigora, 2016 WL 4094723, at *2 (“Education expenses are deductible if they satisfy the general requirements under section 162 as well as the specific requirements under the regulations. Section 162 requires a taxpayer to be presently engaged in a trade or business in order for education expenses to be deductible.”)

\textsuperscript{136} See infra notes 137–148 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{137} See 181 F.2d 906, 906–08, 911 (4th Cir. 1950).

\textsuperscript{138} See \textit{id.} at 909 (explaining that “the very logic of the situation here shows that [the taxpayer] went to Columbia to maintain her present position; not to attain a new position; to preserve not expand or increase; to carry on, not to commence”). The court further concluded that it made no difference that the taxpayer admitted to enjoying her summer courses, as the test for an “ordinary and necessary” business expense turns on the business relevance of the activity, and not whether the activity was separately enjoyable. \textit{See generally id.} (holding that the taxpayer’s admission that she enjoyed the courses as irrelevant to the issue of tax deductibility given that they served a business purpose in allowing her to carry out her current line of work).

\textsuperscript{139} See supra notes 131–135 and accompanying text.
anthropology at the University of Oslo—studies that included courses taken in English, Spanish, and social studies. The U.S. Tax Court originally had held that the teacher’s program of study in *Ford* was deductible because the “study in anthropology and linguistics was appropriate and helpful, and did in fact improve [the taxpayer’s] skills in teaching English, social studies, and Spanish.” The court further pointed out that the study did not prepare the taxpayer for a new line of work, but related specifically to his current field of employment.

Likewise, in 1968, in *Furner v. Commissioner*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit held that a junior high school social studies teacher who resigned from her school system to pursue a year of full-time graduate study in history may deduct the costs of her studies because they were a normal incident of carrying on the business of teaching. In *Furner*, the court also held it immaterial that the junior high school social studies teacher had quit her teaching job to pursue the studies. Importantly, the court held that the teacher intended to return to her profession upon the completion of her year’s study.

Finally, in its 2016 decision of *Kopaigora v. Commissioner*, the U.S. Tax Court allowed an accounting professional to deduct his tuition, travel costs, and meals related to an Executive M.B.A. program at Brigham Young University. The *Kopaigora* decision expressed no concern that the taxpayer’s deductions included more than $18,000 for one year’s tuition, nor that the taxpayer travelled across state lines to attend his classes. All that mattered was that the expenses actually met the requirements of the particular tax deduction.

---

140 *Ford v. Comm’r (Ford II)*, 487 F.2d 1025, 1025–1026 (9th Cir. 1973) (per curiam); *Ford v. Comm’r (Ford I)*, 56 T.C. 1300, 1301 (1971) *aff’d* 487 F.2d at 1025–1026.
141 *Ford I*, 56 T.C. at 1306.
142 See id. at 1304 (providing “evidence of [the taxpayer’s] continuing active participation in the teaching profession”).
143 393 F.2d 292, 292 (7th Cir. 1968).
144 *Id.* at 295 (rejecting the tax court’s finding of evidence to support the conclusion that the taxpayer did not plan to return to teaching at the conclusion of her studies).
145 *Id.*
146 2016 WL 4094723, at *1–2.
147 *Id.* at *2.
148 See id.
III. HOW COLLEGES MIGHT PROVIDE THEIR ATHLETES WITH BONA FIDE EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS WITHOUT RISKING THE TAX-EXEMPT STATUS OF ATHLETES’ SCHOLARSHIPS

Section A of this Part discusses how, based upon the foregoing, it seems likely that colleges, with proper tax planning, could pay their athletes without compromising the tax-exempt status of the athletes’ scholarships.\(^\text{149}\) Section B of this Part explores the numerous ways colleges could structure athlete compensation to conform to the rules under the U.S. tax code for tax-exempt education.\(^\text{150}\)

A. “Pay for Play” Athletes and the “Qualified Scholarship” Exemption

To begin with the simplest alternative, colleges likely may continue to offer their “pay for play” athletes “qualified scholarships” under \(\text{§ 117}\) of the tax code as long as the colleges do not place any express conditions on these scholarships.\(^\text{151}\) For example, this means that the colleges would need to allow their “pay for play” athletes to keep their scholarships even if these athletes breach their “pay for play” agreements, or otherwise quit their sport.\(^\text{152}\)

Structuring athlete scholarships in this guaranteed manner would seem to present some financial risk to colleges.\(^\text{153}\) For example, a college athlete could conceivably quit after receiving a scholarship and enjoy four years of free tuition without providing any benefit to the college athletic program for which he was given a scholarship.\(^\text{154}\) Nevertheless, this risk seems rather low under a “pay for play” model because paid, elite college athletes would still have a financial incentive to perform in their sports.\(^\text{155}\) Indeed, the most likely candidates to take advantage of a guaranteed four-year scholarship without participating in their intended sport would be athletes who decide to

\(\text{149}\) See infra notes 151–164 and accompanying text.

\(\text{150}\) See infra notes 165–197 and accompanying text.

\(\text{151}\) See I.R.C. \(\text{§ 117(a)-(d)}\) (2012) (qualified scholarships).

\(\text{152}\) Rev. Rul. 77-263, 1977-2 C.B. 47.

\(\text{153}\) See Solomon, supra note 97 (explaining that many colleges do not like to give athletes four-year guaranteed athletic scholarships because they “complained that players were accepting these deals and not playing” and “[s]chools wanted a two-way street”).

\(\text{154}\) See id.

\(\text{155}\) This financial incentive would result from the reality that, even though the athletes’ scholarship was guaranteed and non-rescindable, the athletes’ pay, as part of an employment contract, would be contingent upon work performed. While it is theoretically true that a college athlete could enjoy his free scholarship while “holding out” on athletic performance for a higher paying salary, such “hold out” scenario is unlikely given the limited length of the college football season, the limited number of years college athletes maintain eligibility, and that athletes may have some incentive to both showcase their talent and not engage in “hold out” practices to avoid scaring off potential future NFL and NBA employers.
focus on an educational pursuit other than professional sports during the course of their college experience. Generally, the loss of these athletes do not represent substantial harm to college athletic programs.

In addition to § 117’s requirement that an athlete’s scholarship be non-contingent, colleges also would need to ensure their “pay for play” athletes maintain complete control over their course of study to avoid the appearance of improper employer control or oversight. Thus, colleges should implement firewalls between their athletic departments and their course advisors to ensure that athletes are not impermissibly influenced by the athletic department in their course selection.

In a similar vein, colleges that seek to offer “qualified scholarships” to “pay for play” athletes must ensure that their athletes are provided with scholarships in the form of in-kind benefits rather than cash. The importance of not providing “pay for play” athletes with cash scholarships emerges from the U.S. Tax Court’s rulings in Proskey v. Commissioner and Zolnay v. Commissioner—each of which, at least implicitly, viewed the payment of a cash stipend as hindering an individual taxpayer’s “qualified scholarship” argument.

Finally, wherever possible, it is advantageous for a college to provide its “pay for play” athletes with scholarships in the same format and on the

---

156 See generally Ben Shumate, 30 Percent of Athletes Quit Respective Teams, BROWN DAILY HERALD (Apr. 28, 2016), http://www.browndailyherald.com/2016/04/28/30-percent-of-athletes-quit-respective-teams [https://perma.cc/W54B-SHQD] (concluding that about thirty percent of students that arrive at Brown University as college athletes—about eighty students out of 260—leave their sports team before their senior season).

157 See Treas. Reg. § 1.117-4(c)(2) (as amended in 1985) (explaining that to constitute a “qualified scholarship” the primary purpose must be “to further the education and training of the recipient in his individual capacity” and too much oversight over how a recipient were to use their scholarship may begin to step beyond the “individual capacity” and into an employee capacity).

158 See Proskey v. Comm’r, 51 T.C. 918, 924 (1969) (explaining how the taxpayer was not able to pursue his own course of study because of the supervision of the hospital where he worked); see also Marc Edelman, Moving Past Collusion in Major League Baseball: Healing Old Wounds, and Preventing New Ones, 54 WAYNE L. REV. 601, 638 (2008) (explaining how firewalls are used “to prevent the disclosure of sensitive information” between parties); Definition of Firewall, INVESTOPEDIA, http://www.investopedia.com/terms/f/firewall.asp [https://perma.cc/X3UZ-4894] (last visited Aug. 11, 2017) (explaining that “[a] firewall is a legal barrier preventing the transference of inside information”). It is worth noting that the NCAA already requires such firewalls to a limited extent, as indicated by association rules that limit a single faculty member, the Faculty Athletics Representative to handling interactions between the athletic department and the faculty related to college athletes’ obligations and in-class performance. See generally MICHAEL A. MIRANDA & THOMAS S. PASKUS, NAT’L COLLEGIATE ATHLETICS ASS’N, ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND PERSPECTIVES OF NCAA FACULTY ATHLETICS REPRESENTATIVES 10 (2013), https://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/FAR_STUDY_Report_final.pdf [https://perma.cc/BQ3B-HTVF].

159 See supra note 83 and accompanying text.

same terms as non-athletes’ scholarships. Where college athletes otherwise qualify for pure academic scholarships, colleges should provide athletes with traditional academic scholarships. Similarly, where athletes otherwise qualify for state tuition assistance programs, colleges should help the athletes to obtain these other forms of aid. At highly endowed colleges that offer free college attendance to students from low-income families, athletes who qualify under this basis should receive free tuition this way, rather than through special athletic scholarships.

B. Alternative Tax Reductions under “Pay for Play”

Furthermore, even if some college athletes would not meet the requirements for a “qualified scholarship” exemption, there are still other ways that colleges may assist their “pay for play” athletes in achieving meaningful tax savings on their education.

1. Devising an Educational Assistance Program that Benefits College Athletes

Aside from the “qualified scholarship” exemption, colleges can provide employee-athletes with some tax relief for their education by offering the education through a formal “educational assistance program,” as articulated by § 127 of the tax code. In some ways, the U.S. tax code’s educational assistance exemption is more flexible than the “qualified scholarship” exemption because it allows recipients to accept the exemption as a quid pro quo for services rendered. In addition, the recipient of educational assistance may choose courses that are either related or unrelated to their jobs.
Nevertheless, one of the major drawbacks of “pay for play” athletes relying on the educational assistance exemption is that the exemption caps excludable educational expenses at $5,250 per year.\textsuperscript{169} Even for students at state colleges that offer in-state tuition discounts, this exemption would reasonably cover the costs of approximately six to eighteen annual credit hours.\textsuperscript{170} Thus, as long as the NCAA Division I rules continue to require college athletes to complete at least six credit hours per term (plus, make continued annual progress toward graduating), “pay for play” college athletes who receive in-kind tuition benefits exclusively under this section would still suffer a major shortfall.\textsuperscript{171}

Furthermore, the educational assistance exemption does not apply to meals or lodging.\textsuperscript{172} Thus, athletes who rely on the § 127 exemption would need to simultaneously rely upon § 119 of the code to exclude any meals provided by their athletic department employer.\textsuperscript{173} If a college wishes to provide free meals to its “pay for play” athletes, the college should offer these meals on their premises, ideally at the college’s athletic facilities.\textsuperscript{174} The college should also ensure the meals are selected and prepared with the aid of a nutritionist to help ensure athletes’ peak performances in their sport.\textsuperscript{175} Doing so would help to support the argument that the meal provi-
sions are truly “for the convenience of the employer” and not simply a form of latent compensation.\textsuperscript{176}

With respect to attempting to provide employee-athletes with tax-free lodging benefits under § 119, the arguments for this tax exclusion are comparatively more dubious.\textsuperscript{177} It would be a stretch to compare college athletes’ need for lodging with the lodging needs of those in professions where services are occasionally required in the middle of the night such as “park rangers, firefighters, or apartment managers.”\textsuperscript{178} Nevertheless, given the very early morning practices and unusual late night travel required of some college sports teams, one might be able to argue that this exemption would apply to the in-kind benefit of free housing if the housing is located next to either the gymnasium or near the airport (for road games requiring air travel).\textsuperscript{179}

2. Offering Free Education to Athletes as a Fringe Benefit

Yet another way for colleges to provide their “pay for play” athletes with free in-kind tuition would entail applying the fringe benefit provisions of § 132 of the tax code.\textsuperscript{180} While a free education does not generally constitute a fringe benefit, the January 2014 IRS Fringe Benefit Guide recognizes that employee-athletes may be able to exempt the cost of their free educations from gross income as a “working condition fringe” as long as the courses selected “improve[] or develop[] the job-related capabilities” of the employee-athlete.\textsuperscript{181}

Alternatively, even if the free education is not job-related, there still may be a reasonable argument that the free education constitutes a “no-

---

\textsuperscript{176} See I.R.C. § 119.
\textsuperscript{177} See infra notes 178–179 and accompanying text; see also I.R.C. § 119.
\textsuperscript{178} INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., supra note 113, at 49.
\textsuperscript{179} See I.R.C. § 119; see also Nikki Chavanelle, A Day in the Life of a Division I Athlete, DAILY CAMPUS (Mar. 5, 2015, 7:38 PM), http://www.smudailycampus.com/sports/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-division-i-athlete [https://perma.cc/95F8-NFBB] (describing the day of a college athlete, whose day begins with waking up at 5:30 a.m. for practice at 6 a.m.); Laura Pappano, How Big-Time Sports Ate College Life, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 20, 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/education/edlife/how-big-time-sports-ate-college-life.html [https://perma.cc/X3H5-AQ52] (quoting a 2008 report by the Duke University athletics department that described how athletes, who often play in evening road games, “are required to board a flight at 2 a.m., arriving back at their dorms at 4 or 5 a.m., and then are expected to go to class, study and otherwise act as if it were a normal school day”).
\textsuperscript{180} See I.R.C. § 132.
\textsuperscript{181} INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., supra note 113, at 76.
additional-cost service.” 182 Although one most often thinks about free airline tickets and hotel rooms when considering “no-additional-cost services,” enrollment in college courses generally fits the same criteria because colleges bear little, if any, variable costs to adding a few additional students into a course that fails to otherwise achieve full enrollment. 183 Indeed, most college professors, subject to special exceptions, are paid based on the number of credits they teach and not the number of students. 184

Nevertheless, to make an employee-athlete’s free education truly conform to the tax code’s description of a “no-additional-cost service,” colleges would need to make some changes in their method of enrolling athletes into courses. 185 For example, employee-athletes that want their educational benefits to qualify as “no-additional-cost services” would need to enroll in their classes after all of the paying students have chosen their classes. 186 This way, the college athletes that seek this exemption are only able to enroll in courses where there truly is additional capacity and little, if any, variable costs to the college related to their enrollment. 187

3. Allowing Athletes to Pay for College Themselves and Then Take the Costs as a Trade or Business Deduction

Finally, the most elite college athletes—those who would earn substantial income under “pay for play” (whether from their colleges or through third-party endorsements)—may be able to argue that the cost of their education is a “trade or business expense” under § 162(a) of the tax code. 188

Case law seems to support the possibility that the personal payment of a college education represents a deductible business expense as long as the “pay for play” athlete’s educational expenses meet three criteria. 189 These criteria include: (1) the expenses are incurred in connection with carrying on a trade or business; (2) the expenses are not required to meet the mini-

---

182 I.R.C. § 132(b)(1)–(2).
183 See id.; see also BERKOWITZ, supra note 116 (describing airline tickets as the classic example of a no-additional-cost service); Martin Saiz, Economics of Scale and Large Classes, THOUGHT & ACTION 149, 149 (Fall 2014), https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/t-SF_Saiz.pdf [https://perma.cc/X8G7-NRQM] (describing how public universities save money with larger class sizes given the very low variable costs associated with increasing the number of students in a given classroom).
184 See infra note 119 and accompanying text.
185 See BERKOWITZ, supra note 116 (noting that to qualify as a no-additional-cost service, the provided service must represent additional capacity that the provider would not otherwise be able to sell).
186 See I.R.C. § 132(b)(1); BERKOWITZ, supra note 116.
187 See I.R.C. § 162(a).
188 See supra note 131–148 and accompanying text.
mum threshold of a taxpayer’s trade or business, and (3) the expenses do not lead to the qualification of a taxpayer in a new trade or business. 190

“Pay for play” college athletes likely will meet the first and third criteria as long as they pursue coursework directly related to their athletic endeavors. 191 Majors such as sports management and kinesiology provide a relatively easy fit. Meanwhile, studies related to business, communications, and public speaking might also have a sufficient nexus to athletics.

With respect to the second requirement of not meeting the minimum threshold of employment, on the one hand, if one were to look at the narrow profession of a collegiate athlete, it would seem difficult for a “pay for play” athlete to meet this requirement. 192 This is because the NCAA currently requires all college athletes to be full-time students enrolled in the college for which they perform. 193 Thus, unless the NCAA lifts this requirement, one could reasonably presume that pursuing a college degree (albeit, not necessarily having completed one) is a “minimum threshold requirement” to remain “employed.” 194

On the other hand, however, if one were to describe the “pay for play” athlete’s profession more generally as a professional athlete (rather than as a collegiate athlete), an athlete could make a far stronger argument that earning a degree is not required to meet the minimum threshold for his trade or business. 195 Indeed, only fifty percent of professional football players (using NFL players as a relevant sample) and less than fifty percent of men’s professional basketball players (using NBA players as a relevant sample) have a college degree. 196 Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that a college degree is not required in general to meet the minimum threshold for employment as either a football or men’s basketball player. 197

190 See INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., supra note 113, at 76.
191 See infra note 195–197 and accompanying text.
192 See infra note 193–194 and accompanying text.
194 See I.R.C. § 162(a); INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., supra note 113, at 77.
195 See infra note 196–197 and accompanying text.
197 See id.
CONCLUSION

It is understandable why some university employees and congressmen have expressed trepidation about the movement to bring “pay for play” to college sports. If colleges with big-time athletics programs share their revenues with athletes, it leaves less revenue for colleges to either reinvest into other programs or to allocate to school administrators, athletic directors or coaches. In addition, for those colleges that do not substantially profit from their football and men’s basketball programs, the “pay for play” model forces them to choose between forgoing the recruitment of elite athletes, cutting expenses in other ways, or potentially increasing operating losses.198

Nevertheless, any attempts to use purported tax liability as the reason to avoid the “pay for play” model either misconstrues the plain meaning of the U.S. tax code or is simply disingenuous. Even if college sports were to move to a “pay for play” model, with careful tax planning, colleges could likely continue to provide their athletes with “qualified scholarships” under § 117 of the U.S. tax code. In addition, colleges most likely could continue to offer their athletes tax savings through a formal “education assistance program” or by providing education as a “working condition fringe” or “no-additional-cost service.”

Based on the foregoing, there is reasonable uncertainty as to whether colleges that hire “pay for play” athletes would ever need to treat their athletes’ free education as taxable. Thus, the argument that a “pay for play” model of college sports would transform all college athletic scholarships into taxable gains is far weaker than “pay for play” opponents would have people to believe. Although there may indeed be good faith reasons for the concern over shifting college sports to a “pay for play” model, claims that “pay for play” would impose colossal tax liability on college athletes are simply dubious.

198 See generally Hobson & Rich, supra note 14 (noting how less successful college sports programs such as Rutgers University have refused to make the choice to downgrade their athletic programs or offer less money to their coaches—thus causing these programs to operate at a loss, even without a free market to pay college athletes).