

ATHLETIC SCHOLARSHIPS CHANGE LIVES



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The gathering of friends at a tailgate party; the sounds of the band that fill a stadium or arena; the excitement on campus when the home team wins; and the pride one feels in their alma mater's victories. These traditions are being confronted in ways never before seen in intercollegiate athletics.

College athletics as we know it is being challenged in the courts and, frankly, in public opinion. Some are valid concerns that are being addressed.

One area in particular should not be lost in the discussion — the value of a scholarship.

As a former collegiate wrestler, athletics director and now as commissioner of the Big 12 Conference, I know from all perspectives how important athletic scholarships are to young students and their families. When naysayers discuss the problems within college athletics, you often hear the very shortsighted argument about how student athletes should be compensated for services, as if they were somehow university employees.

What is seldom considered is the potential security provided to generations of student-athletes and their families. Athletic scholarships provide recipients the one thing that everyone universally agrees provides the most significant opportunity to impact earning potential over a lifetime — a college education.

In these overly simplistic arguments, the value of the college education is simply taken for granted. Anyone who has ever faced the reality of putting a child through four, five or even six years of college understands the economic barriers that must be overcome. Every year thousands of young people and their families are helped financially through athletic scholarships and provided the opportunity to attend college.

Many of those student-athletes would not be able to attend college without their athletic scholarships, and the vast majority would incur debt (either for themselves or their families) to chase the dream of higher education. What a great advantage for the rest of a young person's life to have little or no college debt. Keep in mind, one in five student-athletes are first generation college students. By earning a college degree, they open new possibilities for their family and its future generations.

Athletic scholarships are second only to the GI Bill in providing assistance for students to attend college.

While the debate over college athletics will no doubt continue, let's not forget who is at the center of this issue — fine young men and women working hard in the classroom and their athletic arena to achieve excellence. We call them student-athletes. You might just call them neighbors, friends, or, we hope, leaders.