

Written Statement for Senate HELP Committee

Abigail Lynch, *Former Illinois Women's Soccer & Track Student-Athlete*

Chair Cassidy, Ranking Member Senator Sanders, and Members of the Senate HELP Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing today. My name is Abigail Lynch, and I am a former dual-sport student-athlete at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In college I had the privilege of competing in the Big Ten Conference with some of the country's best athletes while also earning a renowned education. I'm here today representing the voices of hundreds of thousands of student-athletes across the Big Ten, NCAA, and broader United States.

College athletics is not broken. Every day, student-athletes across this country train rigorously and compete to the best of their abilities. Simultaneously, they are devoting time to studying and preparing for life after sport, which for the majority, result in blazers, not helmets. This uniquely American system continues to produce some of the world's most talented athletes and leaders, while also expanding access to higher education and opportunity for individuals who may not otherwise have had it.

My own experience reflects that. During my time at Illinois, I competed as a women's soccer and track student-athlete for four years. There were moments where balancing two teams, travel, and a full academic course load felt almost impossible, especially when I was dealing with injuries. But in those moments of struggle, the support system around me made all the difference. I had access to athletic trainers, team doctors, and comprehensive healthcare that allowed me to recover and continue competing at a high level. At the same time, my coaches and academic advisors reinforced that I was a student first, holding me accountable in the classroom, supporting my academic goals, and celebrating those achievements just as much as my athletic performance. I took that very seriously, and I graduated with a 4.0 GPA. I wasn't the most talented athlete on my team, but college athletics gave me something arguably more important than accolades: discipline, leadership, and lifelong relationships. This experience worked because it was grounded in education, development, and support, not solely athletic performance.

And that's why I'm here today – to protect and advocate for the system that has provided a life changing experience for me and so many others. Because while college athletics is not broken, it is becoming increasingly unstable. Right now, we are seeing constant change across name, image, and likeness, transfer activity, and eligibility - all often without consistent national standards. Student-athletes, coaches, and institutions alike are operating in a system that lacks clarity and predictability.

Recent data highlights just how sensitive this environment has become. Pulling from the NCAA Research Institute and 2026 NCAA Convention, transfer portal data revealed almost 50% of men's basketball student-athletes and about 20% of men's football student-athletes entered the

portal in 2025 - not only that, but 35% of men's basketball transfers were seeking their third or more institution (NCAA Transfer Portal Data, 2025).

Teams are experiencing significant roster turnover year after year, and too many student-athletes are transferring multiple times without making real academic progress. This level of instability is not sustainable, and it's not in the best interest of student-athletes. We need a path forward that provides stability while continuing to expand opportunities.

First, as Congress considers the future of college athletics, it is critical to be thoughtful about broadly classifying student-athletes as employees. Student-athletes should undoubtedly have opportunities to benefit from their name, image, and likeness and to share in the value they help create for their institutions. Seeing my fellow student-athletes benefit from these opportunities is meaningful and important progress.

At the same time, a sweeping employment model could result in unintended consequences that fundamentally alter the structure of college athletics. It risks shifting the focus from long-term development and education to short-term transactions. Such a shift could also impact the very resources that support student-athletes today, including healthcare, nutrition, academic services, and student-athlete development programming. Institutions may be forced to reallocate resources in ways that reduce opportunities across sports, particularly for Olympic and non-revenue-generating programs.

This raises important considerations related to Title IX. Colleges and universities are required to provide equitable opportunities for male and female student-athletes. An employment model would be driven by Title VII, which does prevent employee discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, but it does not guarantee equal access to opportunities. Title IX continues to be a key driver for the growth of women's sports, and we cannot risk losing this protection.

Second, there is a clear need for a consistent national NIL framework. College athletics is currently operating under a patchwork of state laws, institutional policies, and ongoing legal challenges. This lack of uniformity creates inequities between institutions and conferences and makes it difficult to establish fair and consistent rules for student-athletes. Clear and consistent NIL standards paired alongside uniform guidelines for transfer activity, eligibility, and baseline protections for student-athletes engaging in NIL activities would help restore competitive equity and provide much-needed clarity for all stakeholders.

Third, it is essential that any framework includes a structure that allows for the consistent enforcement of these rules. Without appropriate legal protections, efforts to establish national standards will continue to face ongoing legal challenges. This makes it extremely difficult for any governing body to maintain stability or enforce rules consistently across the system. Rules without teeth are just words on paper. To truly protect all student-athletes and ensure fairness, we

need a system and governing body that can enforce standards and create lasting stability. A limited but clearly defined legal framework would allow for reasonable, student-athlete-centered rules to be implemented and upheld.

Finally, student-athlete protections must remain at the center of any federal solution. Student-athletes today are also navigating new and evolving pressures. Recent NCAA data shows that more than half of Division I men's basketball student-athletes report receiving abusive messages on social media, with nearly half tied directly to sports betting (NCAA GOALS Survey, 2026). This highlights the need for stronger protections as the college athletics environment continues to modernize.

Any solution should ensure continued access to comprehensive healthcare and medical support, scholarship protection including multi-year security, financial literacy education, and appropriate oversight of agents and third-party representatives to protect student-athletes from exploitation. As college athletics evolves, it is critical that student-athletes are supported not only during their careers, but also in preparation for life after sport.

At its core, this issue is not political. It is not partisan. It is about creating a system that works - for student-athletes, for institutions, and for the future of college athletics. College athletics does not need to be torn down and rebuilt. It needs to be stabilized and modernized in a thoughtful and balanced way. We have a real opportunity to get this right. There is a path forward that allows student-athletes to benefit from the value they create, while preserving the structure that supports their education, development, and long-term success. On behalf of student-athletes across the country, I urge Congress to work together in a bipartisan manner to provide the clarity, consistency, and protections that college athletics needs. Thank you for your time and consideration and your commitment to the betterment of college sports.

Reference

NCAA. *GOALS Study of the Student-Athlete Experience* (2026).

https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/research/goals/2026RES_GOALS-AWEdSession.pdf

NCAA. *NCAA Transfer Portal Data* (2025). 2026 NCAA Convention Presentation.