

# Don't Miss This New Fundraising Opportunity: Student-Athletes & the New NIL Rules

Are you taking advantage of this exciting new way to raise funds?

*By Mark Mitchell & Kay Keels*

**A**s a nonprofit leader, you're always scanning the environment for new fundraising opportunities. But have you discovered the new NIL rules that open a brand-new fundraising door?

## What Are the New NIL Rules?

Till now, college athletes have had restrictions on their ability to earn income. These restrictions were dramatically changed in July of 2021 when the NCAA passed rules that allow student-athletes to use their NAME, IMAGE, and LIKENESS (NIL) for commercial or promotional purposes.

These rules provide your organization with intriguing new opportunities to partner with student-athletes to raise funds. Including the name, image, or likeness of a student-athlete in your fundraising materials can be an effective way to promote your cause and attract new supporters.

To date, over 20 states have enacted NIL laws or regulations with discussions under way at the federal level. Any NIL activity must be consistent with laws in the state where the student-athlete's school is located.

## How Can Student-Athletes Help Your Organization Raise Funds?

The well-known marketing-mix – the “4 Ps of Marketing” – is useful for understanding how your organization can capitalize on these new NIL opportunities. The 4 Ps posit that marketers must assemble the right PRODUCT, at the right PRICE, make it available in the right PLACE, and PROMOTE it to increase awareness and interest.

Let's look more closely at the 4 Ps and how you can use them to advantage when you team up with student-athletes:

### 1. Product

Student-athletes are now free to offer goods and services for sale or even start a business to sell merchandise emblazoned with their personal brand. Someone can partner with a student-athlete to create exclusive merchandise that's sold as a fundraiser for your organization. The exclusive sale arrangement may bring new donors to your organization to learn more about your mission.



## “The social-media-influencer role will be the best option.”

Or, as another possibility, your organization can receive a portion of the proceeds each time a student-athlete sells merchandise. For example, a student-athlete located in an area prone to hurricanes and tropical storms could promise to donate 10% of merchandise sales to organizations that offer disaster relief.

It's reasonable to imagine student-athletes' NIL being used in the following ways:

- merchandise for sale (t-shirts, bobble heads, etc.)
- product packaging bearing the NIL of student-athletes
- meet-and-greets, autograph sessions, etc.
- named Youth Sports Camps, Fantasy Camps, etc.
- named private lessons (golf, tennis, softball pitching, etc.)

### 2. Promotion

Your organization now has the chance to promote your cause by teaming up with a student-athlete in any number of ways. For example, student-athletes may now earn compensation for serving in the following roles:

- appearing in advertising
- serving as a spokesperson
- attending special events (meet-and-greets, playing a round of golf, etc.)
- serving as a social-media influencer and posting messages that draw attention to your cause.

The social-media-influencer role will probably be the most effective of these options. Some NCAA student-athletes have over 3 million followers on their social-media accounts (Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, and others). They can now monetize their number of followers by being paid to post messages that reach these huge audiences. They can promote your cause to all these people, vastly increasing potential supporters for your organization.

### 3. Price

The decision to compensate (and how much to pay) is a choice that will vary from organization to organization. If student-athletes have a strong interest in your organization's mission or connection to your cause, they're likely to want to raise funds for you without asking for pay. In those cases, it will be important to determine the fair market value of the student-athlete's services.

Other student-athletes may be happy to collect a minimal amount of money for helping to raise funds for you. Certainly, their services will cost far less than professional athletes, entertainers, or other celebrities would charge.

### 4. Place

Your organization's location and your local sports culture (or lack thereof) will influence your decision on how to use

college athlete's NIL for strategic purposes. In a state without any professional sports teams or proximity to a "major league" city, the "local" college athletes may be more visible (and more viable) as

promotional partners. Such states would include Maine, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, New Mexico, and many others.

But, again, remember the importance of student-athletes as social-media influencers. In that role, their appeal isn't place-bound or strictly local.

You may be tempted to assume that student-athletes in the more highly visible sports (football, men's basketball) could offer the best strategic fit. Once again, however, don't forget the importance of social-media influencers. Currently, twin sisters (Haley and Hanna Cavinder) who play women's basketball at Fresno State have over 3.3 million followers on Tik Tok. This example compares favorably to about 800,000 Twitter followers for the quarterback from Clemson University who was selected first overall in a recent NFL draft (Trevor Lawrence). As of this writing, the Cavinder sisters have already made some NIL deals.

### Find Best-Fit Personal Brands

Unlike professional athletes, college student-athletes are just awakening to the need to establish a cohesive personal brand. Many of these young people are creative, hard-working, and reliable teammates. They must find ways for those qualities to stand out in the new NIL era.

Connect with young people who amplify your organization's brand. As you seek partners who share your values, you'll be impressed with the maturity, enthusiasm, and commitment of today's student-athletes. A tie to your organization's brand will help them develop their own branding.

### Create an Action Plan

July 1, 2021 ushered in a new era in college sports. There's both excitement and confusion as old restrictions are removed and new opportunities are created. Here's how to develop an action plan:

**Make the GO/NO GO Decision.** Partnering with a student-athlete is a new experience. The decision to compensate spokespeople and social-media influencers may not mesh well with your organizational values. That's understandable. At a minimum, it's important to be aware of these opportunities so you can decide whether to pursue them.

**Seek Student-Athlete Partners.** Search your state and local community for student-athletes who draw attention for their performance on the field or their following on

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social media. Such highly visible student-athletes may be useful in reaching desirable donors and volunteers for your organization.

**Consider a Product- or Promotion-Oriented Approach.**

*For a product-oriented approach,* partner with a student-athlete to create exclusive merchandise to sell as a fundraiser. It's easy to imagine a bobble head, t-shirt, or other item that brings new people to your organization to learn more about your mission.

*For a promotion-oriented approach,* engage student-athletes as spokespeople, social-media influencers, or meet-and-greet event hosts.

**Look for Best-Fit Matches.** When securing new employees, board members, and volunteers, look for value-added best-fits for your organization. For example, imagine the sister of a special-needs child getting involved with the Special Olympics or the son of a breast cancer survivor committing

to work with the American Cancer Society. The possible connections are endless and thrilling to imagine.

This NIL era is new to all. There are likely to be refinements in state law over time. And, at some point, there may be a federal response. At present, it's certain that there are new possibilities to explore for interested organizations. It's vital to be open to these conversations. 

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### Recommended Resource

**NCAA: Taking Action Page**  
<https://www.ncaa.org/about/taking-action>



### Open More Doors

To learn about more fundraising, marketing, branding, social media, and other opportunities raised in this article, see these resources at NonprofitWorld.org:

- Remember Your Brand when You Market with Social Media** (Vol. 33, No. 4)
- What Has Changed about Marketing?** (Vol. 37, No. 3)
- Make Your Event Sponsorships Stick Without Backbreaking Labor** (Vol. 36, No. 3)
- Show Off a Little: New Approach Forges Bonds** (Vol. 26, No. 4)
- Engage Donors with Social Media** (Vol. 33, No. 3)
- The Nonprofit Branding Exercise** (Vol. 26, No. 1)
- Engage Donors with Social Media** (Vol. 33, No. 3)
- Defining Your Leader Brand** (Vol. 25, No. 2)
- Lessons from the Sports World** (Vol. 23, No. 2)
- Accelerating Fundraising through Social Media** (Vol. 28, No. 3)
- To Gain Passionate Supporters, Try a Fantasy Camp** (Vol. 34, No. 2)
- A Better Brand = More Loyal Supporters** (Vol. 38, No. 4)