

**HEARING BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION**

June 17, 2021

Written Testimony of Christina Chenault  
Former D1 Athlete

Chairwoman Cantwell, Ranking Member Wicker and distinguished members of the Committee,

Thank you all for inviting the opportunity to amplify the voice of the athlete within these conversations by allowing me to testify this morning. This testimony is a reflection of my direct experience and the experience of my former colleagues who are current and former college athletes from institutions across the nation.

**I. Introduction.**

My name is Christina Chenault. For the past 6 years, I've been a Heptathlete on UCLA's Track and Field team, completing my Bachelor's Degree (UCLA- B.A. Psychology '20), and most recently my Master's Degree (UCLA- M.A. Sports Educational Leadership '21) from UCLA. Here, I became a Top-10 All-Time school Heptathlete, NCAA Championship second team All-American, and awarded team captain.

Beyond the Track, I created a sports media platform to raise awareness on current social issues within Athletics(i.e. mental health); I created a Sports Business Association intended to improve the educational tracking and professional outcomes of college athletes; and proudly co-founded UCLA's Black Athlete Alliance to foster spaces of diversity, inclusion, and progression on the college campus.

My media platform featured interviews with college athletes, All-Americans, ESPN anchors, former NBA All-Stars and Olympians from all different backgrounds. Due to our garnered trust within the athletic community, it organically received over 30,000 views within its first year with 0 expenses incurred. As a counter-narrative to the mainstream glamorization of college sports, it brought a sense of reality and clarity to the taboo issues athletes face in their day-to-day lives.

The Sports Business Association successfully hosted weekly seminars of over 100 guests, with speakers from Fortune 500 sports companies and franchises such as: Nike Inc., The Los Angeles Clippers, UCLA Athletics, The Los Angeles Dodgers, The Los Angeles Lakers, Creative Artists Agency (CAA), the U.S. Olympic Committee, and The Golden State Warriors...to name a few.

Within our pilot year, the Black Athlete Alliance nationally-elevated and reconciled policies of hate speech, while also partnering with the athletic department for social justice campaigns to move the world forward through the power of sport.

It is through the culmination of these experiences, along with my close-knit relationship to the athletic community nation-wide that allows me to speak with confidence on the issues pertaining to today's hearing: NIL, Health & Safety, and Educational Outcomes. Respectively, I will outline my testimonial experiences and hope in doing so, to emphasize the importance of greater athlete protections throughout these categories.

## **II. NIL(Name, Image, & Likeness).**

The commodification of athletes has become rampantly apparent as the commercialization of college sports steadily rises. As a female student and athlete-entrepreneur I was not able to profit off of my own my sports media platform. Despite viral content, the potential for any wide-scale distribution or business model sustainability was completely revoked through the current restrictions of NIL. We constantly had compliance monitoring us for who we could have on our shows, what we spoke about, how we spoke, what we wore, who we worked with and how we edited our interviews. It made the process very difficult, frustrating, and less enjoyable for the sake of staying eligible.

From a business standpoint I was paralyzed, but shown the monopoly of financial power the NCAA had over us. This issue not only disproportionately affects athletes from low-income households, but affects all athletes at a psychological level. Moreover, these regulations funnel college athletes into an "athlete-only" mentality, neglecting potential creative outlets and professional development opportunities. Within the sports industry, some of these professional development opportunities that use our name, image, or likeness have a temporary window of opportunity that peaks during our college years. Especially in sports that lack established American professional leagues (i.e. Track and Field), athletes are being stripped from their rights at the most imperative time.

## **III. Health & Safety.**

The conversation of health and safety is inextricably linked to the decisions around NIL. For context, when I came into my athletic program the sprints team had 5 coaches in 5 years. These coaching transitions not only made it difficult on athletes physically and emotionally, but financially as new coaches reduced the scholarship of existing athletes. This unexpected reduction of scholarship from a coach that favors their own recruits costs the initial athlete thousands of dollars. Additionally, this fear of constantly being at risk for scholarship reduction for reasons beyond your control is wrongfully common within the collegiate athletic experience. Where is the athlete supposed to suddenly come up with this significant amount of money? This has forced athletes to have to transfer, quit, or take time off from training in order to work. These

unclear contractual regulations illustrate the clearly established power dynamic between the institution and the athlete where the current system fails the athlete every time.

From a psychological safety standpoint, I have seen coaches turn down sports psychologists because they were subjectively considered “out of budget”. Like any budget, the decisions are a reflection of the organizational values, further proven as later coaching staffs with the same budget were able to bring in psychologists. Other athletes I’ve spoken to do not feel comfortable as an athlete going to psychologists on campus or near athletic departments for the distrust of their institutions or the fear of being seen or reported back to their coach. Where are the athletes supposed to go if they don’t have access to mental health professionals they can trust?

A traumatic and eye-opening experience for me viewing athlete health occurred in my 4th year when I heard the devastating news that my friend, another college athlete, had committed suicide. In my grief, I wished there were more resources, and more outlets for athletes to be heard and helped. This is when I realized that these issues around athlete health were not tenuous ones, but matters of life and death. The detriments of athlete mental health stem from the win-at-all-costs culture in college sports where athletes struggle in silence in fear for their scholarship, playing time, or social ridicule.

Another experience from the product of a win-at-all-costs culture, was seen physically through the process of my friend’s medical retirement. Before granting an official medical diagnosis or MRI, she was asked to compete for the greater good of the team. She was forced to bring in her parent to advocate on her behalf to receive the proper attention and treatment of her second torn meniscus in two years. I noticed that when athletes brought in a parental figure to the training room, they were treated and spoken to completely different. This revealed the political posturing institutions and athletic programs can take if additional policy is not implemented to protect these athletes.

#### **IV. Educational Outcomes.**

When it comes to educational outcomes, there is substantial educational tracking occurring within the collegiate athletic space. Namely, athletes at respective schools are predominately housed in 1-3 majors, “athlete majors”, that generally require less work or effort to fulfill. This is seen across all sports, but especially in the revenue-producing sports that have a heightened “athlete-student” culture in unison with the lucrative championship culture. Despite the claimed “educational trade off”, a majority of athletes are not on substantial scholarship yet equally face educational exploitation. Although on paper the NCAA limits practice hours to 20 hours a week, we as athletes know that this is just a formality and experience far more hours of athletically related time, closer to 40 or 50 hours each week. This exhaustive schedule tracks athletes into curriculum that is based on attainability rather than genuine intellectual curiosity.

Unfortunately, many athletes do not realize how this tracked path can affect their longterm career trajectory until they are faced with it after graduation. Athletes do not have an equal amount of

time as non-athlete students to gain internship experiences or explore an academic or professional curiosity, leaving them utterly disadvantaged in the working world. Ironically, in the college recruiting process, many athletes are sold a dream for their experience athletically and educationally that is not given an equal chance or the sufficient support to materialize. Despite having a four-year degree from a renowned institution, athletes are still disadvantaged by the current collegiate athletics system in lacking the necessary professional experiences employers are looking for.

## **V. Conclusion.**

In closing, I share all of this today in hopes that the true athlete voice is heard and regarded for. In a landscape where fear and power debilitate the surfacing of athlete's stories, I come forth as one with the courage and confidence of ten thousand. In all, these institutions should be held accountable and the college athletes should be protected at greater levels. From the protection of athlete NIL rights, health & safety precautions, and educational outcomes, I believe that change here is necessary and that change here is possible. Thank you all for your time and consideration.