

The Fallacy of College Athletic Scholarships, and Realistic Alternatives

By Dan Henderson, Head Coach of Cascade Canoe & Kayak Racing Team

One of the first questions parents often ask when their son or daughter takes up Olympic-style canoe or kayak racing is, “what are my child’s chances of getting a college athletic scholarship? In any sport, the hope of a college athletic scholarship is usually a fallacy. Parents and young athletes tend to hear the term “college scholarship” as a panacea and think that suddenly college becomes a no-cost or low-cost experience. That’s far from reality. This paper explores the facts and realistic hopes of college financial aid for paddlesports athletes.

There are few scholarships. Only 2% of high school athletes receive scholarships of any kind, \$100 to a full ride. This statistic comes from the NCAA itself.

There are many levels of scholarships. The rarest are full-ride scholarships, where most of the college expenses are covered, which amount to only 3% of all scholarships – so that’s .06% of the total of all high school athletes who receive scholarships. Most athletic scholarship athletes receive some form of partial scholarship, with the vast majority being very small.

Few full rides. Only football, men and women's basketball, and women's gymnastics, volleyball, and tennis receive mandated full scholarships. By rule of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), here the option for the university is either a full ride or nothing. All the other sports receive a maximum number of full scholarship equivalents that coaches then pool and distribute among their athletes as they wish.

Not every sport has scholarships. Schools decide the sports for which they want to offer scholarships. Once a college decides to offer a scholarship, they are limited by sport and the NCAA to a maximum number of full scholarship equivalents. There is no minimum. So even if a student is accepted to a university that has the right sport, there may be no scholarships offered or available.

Some sports only have scholarships for only one gender. NCAA Rowing, for example has a maximum of 20 full scholarships equivalents total per college for women. There are none for men, as men’s rowing is not a NCAA sport. In college, men’s rowing is a club sport.

Scholarships can be very small. Most of the sports receive a specific number of full-ride equivalent scholarships, which the coaches pool, and then divide and distribute as they choose. So what often happens is the coach offers, at the very most, 1 or two 2 mostly full rides. These go to the most talented athletes in the world, and are often used to recruit top athletes from other countries. The remaining pooled funds are distributed broadly among most of the rest of the team members, at individual levels determined by coaches. The results are often heavily diluted amounts of \$100 or \$200 per athlete per year. So essentially, while the athlete can say they’re on “scholarship,” the reality is the level of the scholarship is so low that it only buys a couple of books per term.

Statistically, the average scholarship is a total of \$10,400 for 4 years. The average cost per year of college is now \$34,700 per year (\$138,800 for 4 years), so the average athletic scholarship covers less than one tenth of the cost of tuition. Full-ride scholarships are factored into this amount, and if those are taken out, then the amount is much lower. For example, if you take out football and basketball, the average drops to \$8,700 (or \$2,175 per year) or about 6% of average tuition. Again this is an average with a couple of superstars receiving more and the rest a lot less.

Scholarships are not automatic. Scholarships are not automatic and must be renewed each year. There is no guarantee that a scholarship will be renewed from year to year. Schools are not allowed to make multi-year commitments for athletic scholarships. So a college coach can pull an athlete into the program their freshman year and then not continue the athletic scholarship for the remaining 3 years.

Collegiate sport is a full-time job. Athletes who are on scholarships can expect to have their college experience defined by their sport. Division 1 athletes can expect to spend more than 37 hours each week involved with sport. Also, their social life is focused on activities related to their sport. And, if student athletes fall behind in their studies, there is often little flexibility in reducing sport time to catch back up, without risk to sport participation.

The college experience can be very multi-faceted, opening horizons to a student in a wide variety of and entirely unexpected ways, and to have it so very narrowly defined by a collegiate sport does not serve the overall academic and personal growth experience well.

Merit Awards may be a better option. Merit Awards are scholarships that are granted for excellent achievement in any activity valued by the institution. They are not based on financial need at all and typically reduce tuition by 50 percent. Merit awards can be granted for excellence in canoe/kayak racing and have been. In my experience as an undergraduate student at Occidental College (class of 1987, economics major, history minor), it was far greater than the 50%. I was a member of the US Team in canoe and had raced and trained in Hungary, and won 2 Pan American bronze medals when I applied. Because of my achievement in the canoe, as well as solid academics, I received a substantial Merit Award, far more than the vast majority of university athletic scholarships.

And Merit Awards can be granted for multiple years, so a student can receive the award all four years of their college career. Compared with athletic scholarships that can only be granted for one year at a time, Merit Awards can provide much more assurance and security for the entire academic career.

Besides Merit Awards, there are many other realistic options for financial aid that can be explored as well. Several web sites provide information on Merit Awards and most colleges list the scholarships they offer on their web site. All financial aid can be discussed during the admissions process, during interviews, after an admittance offer has been made, and before acceptance.

So, please don't get sucked into the fallacy of college athletic scholarships. Stick with and focus on canoe/kayak, pursue high-level goals and greatness in this wonderful sport in line with the development curves as presented in the ACA Level 1 Coaching Course, and in my paper, "Why Do We Train?" Also study really hard in high school, then go to a great college that will provide you with academic and personal challenge, keep training and racing, and pursue personal, academic, and canoe/kayak greatness!

Our national organization, the American Canoe Association, should not spend time and energy on trying to get canoe/kayak into the university program and find athletic scholarships. This is another example of the ACA focusing on what we don't have and trying to get something that is a long-shot at best, and with very questionable benefits at the least. It's an example of why our sport does not move forward.

Instead the ACA should focus on what we do have – a good base of a club program. The ACA should put its efforts into building existing clubs, helping new ones form, and helping encourage and equip all to provide opportunities for American youth to learn, train, race, and achieve at the highest levels in the world. That's a path to scale up both membership numbers and international performance. Let's focus on what we have and build on it.

Hope this helps! DH

References

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