



EARNING EARLY

Can money skills keep pace with the money?

College athletes can now earn while they compete. Let's help them make the most of it by building financial skills that last a lifetime and prevent future problems.

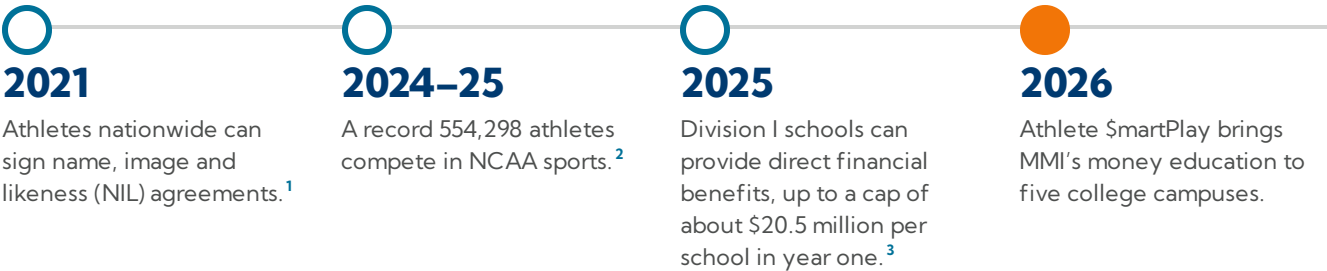
Maura Attardi

Director of Sports Education, Money Management International

In the past five years, college sports has changed in ways few predicted. Athletes can now earn from their name, image and likeness, and Division I schools can now share financial benefits with them directly. In the first year of that system, 307 schools paid \$1.77 billion straight to 34,915 athletes, across 33 conferences and 45 sports.¹⁸ That is **good news**. The next question is whether the skills to manage that money can arrive as fast as the money did.

THE STATE OF PLAY

A new economy, built in five years



This is not only a story about stars. A peer-reviewed study of every athlete at four universities estimated that NIL value runs across rosters, varying between schools and within them.⁴ For many athletes the amounts are likely to be modest. Modest income still comes with adult rules, risks and responsibilities.

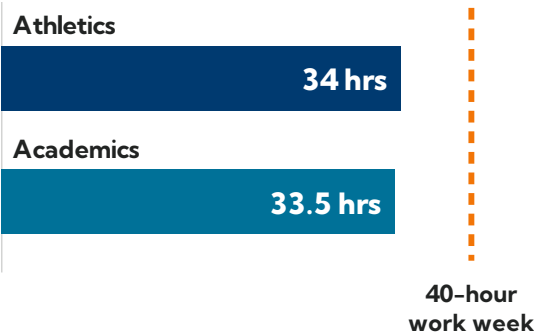
What the IRS says about NIL income

- ✓ Generally **taxable**, even when paid in merchandise or gift cards
- ✓ Generally subject to **Social Security and Medicare** taxes
- ✓ May require **estimated tax payments** during the year
- ✓ May bring **state tax** where the income is earned

Source: IRS (note 5).

Very little spare time

Typical (median) weekly hours reported by Division I athletes in season.



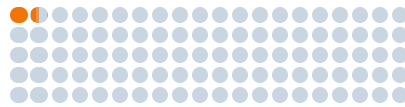
Each one alone is close to a full-time job.

Source: NCAA GOALS study (note 6).

A short window: out of every 100 draft-eligible players, about how many were drafted in 2023?

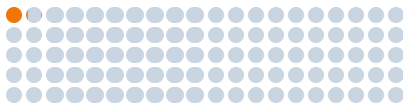
1.5

in 100 · college football, NFL draft



1.1

in 100 · men's basketball



0.9

in 100 · women's basketball



That is why Athlete \$martPlay teaches more than NIL: athletes also look at the careers ahead of them and the money decisions of adult life.

Each grid shows 100 draft-eligible athletes; orange marks those drafted. Few go on to play professionally, and money skills outlast a playing career. Source: NCAA (note 7).

The gap is about timing, not talent

Many athletes arrive at college with limited exposure to financial education, and little time to catch up given their academic, athletic and new sponsorship commitments.⁸ A 2025 study using federal survey data found that college athletes generally had lower financial literacy than other students, even after accounting for background and school.⁹ That is not a criticism of athletes or schools. The money simply arrived faster than the education, and athletes' time each day for more learning is limited. Thoughtfully, Florida, Texas and Tennessee included financial literacy training for athletes in their first NIL laws.¹

In our 2026 summer scholar program, we heard from people who work in college sports that financial education is a major gap, and that a single workshop is a start, not a solution.

"Life changing." But it needs to last.

Heard in our 2026 summer scholar program: how one professional who works with college athletes described these opportunities, adding that education is what makes the benefit last.

WHERE IT CAN GO

Earlier is better

MMI is a trusted nonprofit that has helped people through money trouble for decades; our roots go back to 1958.¹⁰ Clients rate MMI 4.8 out of 5 stars across 6,000 reviews, including first-party, Google, Trustpilot and the Better Business Bureau, while 81% report feeling an immediate decrease in stress after working with us.¹¹ Much of that help comes after the trouble starts, and more young adults are reaching that point: in 2025, Gen Z was the fastest-growing group seeking our help, up 37% from the year before.¹² We would rather meet them sooner, with proactive financial education that helps the next generation understand taxes, savings and how to manage credit successfully over a lifetime.

Research points the same way. A review of 76 randomized experiments with more than 160,000 people found that, on average, financial education improves both what people know and what they do with money.¹³ Another review found smaller effects that fade over time, and suggested teaching close to real decisions.¹⁴ For athletes, those moments are easy to name: a first agreement, tax season, a transfer, graduation. And a peer-reviewed study linked nonprofit credit counseling to lower debt over the following year and a half, compared with a similar group.¹⁵

Our goal is simple: every athlete learns money skills before the first payment, with a refresher at each big decision, free of any sales pitch and in a way that fits a busy schedule.

THREE STEPS FORWARD

Start now, learn more, reach further

STEP 1 · NOW

Athlete \$martPlay: working today

**Unbiased money education
on five college campuses.**

MMI has years of experience teaching money skills to professional athletes, including players in the NFL and Major League Soccer. Since January 2026, Athlete \$martPlay has also worked on five college campuses, currently at no cost to schools. Workshops come to the team. Athletes start with the life they want (a career, a city, a retirement goal) and build a budget from there.

STEP 2 · NEXT

Research

A national survey of college students, both athletes and non-athletes, so schools and families have better information.

STEP 3 · SCALE

Reach more athletes

Bring the program to more teams, schools and conferences, with funders and partners.



Maura Attardi, MMI's Director of Sports Education, works with teams and athletes from college sports to the pros. Photo: Money Management International.

We teach taxes, credit and saving, how to choose a financial adviser, and how advisers are paid. We do not endorse any outside adviser, bank or financial product. Families are welcome. We have begun asking athletes for feedback before and after workshops, and plan to share what we learn.

Step 2: Research that measures what matters

There is little published research on how NIL income affects athletes' finances over time. MMI plans a national survey of college students, both athletes and non-athletes. It will look at money knowledge and confidence, tax readiness, family expectations and plans for life after sport, by gender, sport and division. Where possible it will use tested tools such as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's ten-question financial well-being scale.¹⁶ Answers will be anonymous, we plan to publish the findings, and we welcome academic partners.

Step 3: Reach more athletes

More than 550,000 athletes compete in NCAA sports alone.² No single organization can reach them all, and every group has a part to play.



Photo: SDI Productions / iStock.

NEARLY

1 in 5

college athletes wish their coaches talked more about budgeting and managing money, in a 2025 NCAA survey of more than 20,000 athletes.¹⁷ The demand is already there.

Athletic directors and schools

Bring Athlete SmartPlay to your teams, and build money skills into the athlete calendar.

Funders

Help keep the program free for schools and bring it to more campuses.

Conference and NCAA leaders

Help make money education a standard part of athlete development in every division.

Athletes and families

Ask your school for it. The best time to learn is before the first payment.

MMI also plans to convene an advisory group of athletes, coaches, administrators, educators, researchers and mental health professionals to keep this work grounded and agree on the outcomes worth tracking.

“The opportunity arrived fast. The skills to match it can arrive right alongside it — taxes, saving and credit, taught early and revisited at every big decision.”

Jim Triggs

President & Chief Executive Officer, Money Management International

Talk with us: athletesmartplay.org

NOTES

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