

Protect College Sports Act of 2026

Overview

Sponsored by Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) and the lead co-sponsor, Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA), the bipartisan Protect College Sports Act of 2026 is a comprehensive college athletics bill that would establish a federal framework intended to address an array of issues in the college athletics realm.

Marked up by the Senate Commerce Committee on June 18, 2026, the bill seeks to create a federal set of guardrails to stabilize the college athletics environment post-*Alston* and post-*House v. NCAA* agreements. It would preserve student-athlete NIL rights while giving athletic associations authority to regulate compensation, eligibility, recruiting, transfers, and related conduct. The bill would also preempt conflicting state and local laws in key areas (including NIL, transfers, and eligibility) and provide targeted antitrust protections for covered national rules. But the bill does not address the issue of whether student athletes can be classified as employees.

Major Provisions

NIL Rights, Athlete Compensation, and Institutional Impact

The bill protects the right of student-athletes and prospective student-athletes to earn compensation from their **name, image, and likeness (NIL)**. It includes definitions of key NIL terms and permits student-athletes to retain agents, but requires disclosure of NIL contracts between Division 1 (D1) student-athletes and third parties (other than institutions) over \$600. The bill also builds on the post-*House v. NCAA* revenue-sharing framework by allowing institutional NIL and revenue-sharing arrangements subject to a cap.

For athletic associations, colleges and universities, this framework would provide a more uniform federal NIL structure and preempt conflicting state and local NIL laws. The bill would codify much of the NIL and other data schools are currently required to disclose to the NCAA. For the NCAA, it would be required to maintain a database for D1 athletes and their agents to estimate fair market value for NIL agreements.

Transfers

The bill guarantees one transfer by a student-athlete without losing eligibility. It also provides for additional transfer opportunities without losing eligibility under specific conditions, including if a head coach departs, the institution discontinues the student-athlete's sport, the student-athlete pursues graduate study, or the student-athlete is a victim of sexual assault or harassment by an individual associated with the institution. Finally, it codifies transfer portal windows.

Coverage of Medical Expenses After Collegiate Eligibility

The bill would require D1 institutions to provide post-eligibility medical coverage (including sports-related out of pocket medical expenses, independent second opinions, and catastrophic injury insurance) for five years post-eligibility for injury or illness incurred through participation in a D1 intercollegiate sport. Division I institutions that generate less than \$20 million annually in athletics revenue and demonstrate financial

hardship will have access to an NCAA national fund of at least \$60 million annually to provide financial resources to enable institutions to meet the new post-eligibility medical coverage requirements. The NCAA currently administers a Post-Eligibility Insurance Program available to all student-athletes at all institutions in all divisions.

Employee Status of Athletes

The bill is neutral on whether student athletes can be classified as employees, so the status quo remains.

Scholarships

Under the bill, athletics scholarships or grant aid cannot be revoked because of athletic performance, injury or illness, or roster management decisions. However, the bill does permit revocation of scholarship or grant aid if a student-athlete transfers or is no longer in good standing with the institution (e.g. code of conduct violation, athletic policies, and academic standards). This provision is consistent with current NCAA rules.

Agents

The bill requires agents to register and prohibits them from charging more than 5% of an endorsement contract's value (including NIL agreements), extending an agency contract beyond a student-athlete's eligibility, or making false or deceptive statements.

Antitrust Protection and Enforcement Authority

The bill would permit the NCAA, conferences, or institutions to adopt and enforce certain rules (including NIL and athlete compensation, revenue share cap, eligibility, transfers, recruiting and tampering, agent registration, academic protections, and enforcement penalties) without violating federal antitrust laws.

Women's and Olympic Sports Protections

The bill prohibits the NCAA or D1 conferences from reducing intercollegiate competitions, minimum participants, or the number of varsity teams, including men's, women's and Olympic sports that an institution must sponsor for Division I or Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) membership. Schools that generate more than \$50 million in total annual athletics revenue must maintain non-revenue sport scholarships and roster spots at 2024-25 levels. This provision sunsets after four years for schools that generate between \$50-\$80 million annually and after nine years for schools that generate more than \$80 million annually.

Sports Broadcasting

The bill permits, but does not require, schools to pool their media rights without being subject to antitrust laws if they comply with the bill's requirements.