

STATE OF COLLEGE SPORTS

[FOLLOWING PRESENTATION OF NCAA PRESIDENT'S GERALD R. FORD AWARD  
TO GAIL WILLIAMS, ACCEPTING THE AWARD ON BEHALF OF DAVID  
WILLIAMS II]

PRESIDENT EMMERT:

You know, I'm delighted, Gail, and the whole Williams family is here, because I think for right now, for today, for the issues that we're dealing with, as you very nicely just said, Dave's role and his example is really, really important to us. He was, in so many ways, an exemplar in college sports and in education, and his legacy is a really important reminder to us about the things that we all say all the time.

We're in the human development business, first and foremost. We are and have to be about creating opportunities and providing those opportunities to our students so that they can have success in academics and in their sports and, most importantly, in their life when they go forward.

All three divisions that are represented here focus on that. They focus on academic success and the well-being of our student-athletes and the fairness in the way people get to participate in college sports. And we need to be proud of all of that work and all that you have done, because that work is done by all of you out there in this audience. Dave was sure proud of those efforts. He believed that. He lived it every day.

But I also want to talk about something that's a hard truth right now, and that is, that many people, too many people,

believe that there's something fundamentally unfair right now about college sports. We see it and we read it and we hear it all the time.

I know for me, and I'm sure for most all of you, that's really frustrating. You've been doing a lot to try and make sure that college sports works for our student-athletes. Campuses across all three of the divisions here have been making over the past decade -- for longer than that, but for sure over the past decade -- have been making big investments, big improvements, changing policies all aimed at what's good for student-athletes. It's been challenging and it's been expensive, but it's yielded some great results. We've seen real progress in the way student-athletes receive and are supported with healthcare, and all of our work around concussions and concussion protocols and the research agenda about understanding health and well-being.

We've seen greatly improved scholarship models for our students that benefit them very directly. We've seen remarkable improvements and investments into the academic support structures and the human resources that are providing our students with the academic support so that they can be successful in the classroom with great graduation results as part of that.

We've seen really serious investments in physical training and the wellness efforts that are going on in each of the campuses around the country. We've seen significant

increases in access to championships so that even more students get to participate in this amazing thing, the pursuit of a national championship in all of our 24 sports. And we've seen much greater engagement of student-athletes themselves in the decision-making process of the NCAA across the board.

Overall, if you were to look at the student-athlete experience of a decade ago and compare it to the one today, you would see dramatic improvements. We're all proud of that and we should be. That's an important, important set of changes we've seen in a relatively short period of time.

So when critics say, gee, I'm not sure that this is fair, I'm not sure students are getting all that they should in this process, it's really easy for us to just kinda say, really? Are you kidding me? Have you been paying attention?

But it's important that we just don't wring our hands. It's important that we don't just say, they don't get us, they're not paying attention, they're lazy, they don't understand.

No, I think rather than that, we've got to stop and think and ask ourselves, what's leading them to that conclusion? Why are they thinking those things? What gets them there? I think it's also important that we assume that they're asking these questions and raising these issues with good intent. They want the same things that we want: More opportunities for our student-athletes to achieve in their lives, in the classroom and on the court.

So we've got to ask ourselves, what makes them think that something is not fair? Where is this disconnect? How do they reach that conclusion that causes people to be so critical of something that's -- we look at it and see as so good? I think part of it is, primarily, most people see just a sliver of college sports and we know this, right? They see March Madness, the College Football Playoff, they see game days on TV, the College Game Day. They see multi-million dollar contracts, they see elaborate facilities, they see big Hollywood productions. All of those things we're pleased with and proud of, but when we look at it from afar we shouldn't necessarily be surprised that some people look at this and say, gosh, what's changed in the relationship with the students while all of this has been going on? Something doesn't seem quite right when they juxtapose those two things. They've seen revenues and expenditures explode in some cases across college sports and, then, on the face of it, the relationship with the students seems to be about the same, to them.

Now, we know, everybody here knows, that there is so much more to college sports than just that sliver, right? We know it's a half a million student-athletes, 24 different sports spread across three divisions, having a huge impact on all of those wonderful young men and women. But we've also got to recognize and acknowledge that the world is changing right now and it's changing really, really rapidly and people's perceptions are changing with it.

We have to stay focused on what makes college sports unique and serves those students, but we've also got to adjust to the times.

Now, one of the things that makes college sports unique is that students choose where they go. They're not drafted. They don't choose their nation for Olympic sports. They make choices. They decide what kind of academic program they want. They decide what geographic location they want to be in, the type of athletic experience that they want and any number of other myriad of things, where their girlfriend went or didn't go. Whatever it is that goes into that choice, it's a choice that students and their families make. Schools recruit students, they recruit them for their educational prowess and their athletic prowess, and families and those students make choices for all kinds of different reasons. And some students have different goals for what they want to get out of college, why they're doing this, including why they're playing their sport.

We need to consider the opportunities that they seek, what they need today, and that's largely why we have a divisional model, right? A Division III experience is different than a Division I athletically, a Division II experience is different than those two, and we have created all of that.

Some students, however, we have to recognize, also see college sports primarily as an access point for professional sports. It's a small part, but we need to recognize that, too.

We've got to be cognizant of those dreams and those aspirations. And for those who want to go pro, we need to be supportive of them. We need to be supportive of them, but we gotta do it in a way that's consistent with our values, that's consistent with being a student-athlete.

Now, the reality, of course, is most students aren't going to go professional, very, very few will, including those who think they're going to be professional athletes. And all that does is it underscores why it's so important for us to stay focused on our mission, to stay focused on what we deliver in terms of opportunities for all of our student-athletes.

Again, we're in the human development business. We have to develop them where they are and what they need now. It doesn't matter what they're looking for, we need to help equip them for what's next, no matter what that is. That's our job. And some of college athletes because of that are different; they live different lives. Some of them participate in sports that generate a lot of revenue and that makes a lot of money for the rest of higher education, and they get a lot of attention for it. And we need to recognize that and be cognizant of it. But we have to be clear about one thing, and that is that college sports is about students playing other students. That's what people love about college sports. It's a bedrock principle of everything that we do and we've got to maintain a focus on that, a focus on education, health and well-being and fairness. That's just immutable facts that we have to pay attention to.

Again, that's why we have the divisional model, we get that. There's different approaches to the way we deliver those things across our divisions and institutions, and that's a good thing. But it's even more nuanced than just a divisional divide. You know, what we've seen over the past decade is a rise of college sports as a public trust. The public is much more engaged in what we do, not just what they watch and not just the entertainment but what we do and how we do it. That's a lot bigger than an individual, it's bigger than a campus, it's bigger than a conference or a division, or the whole Association.

The expectations and attitudes of those outside of the Association, outside of college sports, those count a lot today. They're important to us. What's happening in the courts, what the fans think, what legislatures do, those things matter.

Now, I, like probably lots of you, I engage regularly with policymakers, with decision makers and leaders outside of college sports. Many of them have shared their concerns with me, again, just like they do with you, and it is much more than just the name, image and likeness issue. It's basically a debate about the inherent fairness of college sports. And I contend that the whole NIL debate is really a symptom. It's not the main event; it's a symptom. It's important to pay attention to what we're hearing.

When I go in -- and, again, I'm sure you have similar experiences -- when I go in and I talk to people and I emphasize

the human development business that we're really in, that what we really stand for is that, I often hear questions that go way past NIL. That might be in the conversation, that might even be why we started the discussion but that's not what we really wind up talking about.

I get interesting questions. And, again, I bet these resonate with you. I get questions like, you know, I read about a new media contract. Now, Dr. Emmert, is that going to go back to coaches' and administrators' salaries, or is that going to benefit students? Where is that money going to go? I hear questions like, many student-athletes tell me that they don't have time for internships or study abroad, or any of the things that are going to get them ready for their jobs or experiences after school. Why don't you just give them an extra year of support to help them get ready and make that transition? I don't understand why we don't do that. They ask things like, how come some students in some cases get to transfer and play and others don't? Why can't you fix that? That seems easy, but it seems unfair they're not getting those same opportunities.

I've heard policymakers ask me, why are some students sometimes penalized for the misbehaviors of others? I read about a coach, he did something terrible, and the kids didn't go to a bowl game. How is that fair? Can't you figure out something about that?

And we could go down a whole litany of questions that are similar to that, that people are looking at what we do and



saying, gee, are you sure you got the student interest front and center here?

They're important questions. They're good questions. In fact, they're questions that we have been grappling with for some time in the Association, and they're questions in some cases that we're dealing with right here at this convention.

But they also are a reflection of frustrations, a reflection that's understandable when people think, you know, if we're truly committed to the development of our students, then that point of view brings these questions, the questioning of that into perfect sense. Because it leads to a bigger question that I've also heard -- and, again, I suspect you, too -- about who is looking out for the students' best interest today?

And hard news is: Some people say it's not us. They think someone else has the answers and that we're conflicted, that we're not necessarily focused on the students' best interests. Well, nearly 115 years ago, this Association was created for the express purpose of looking out for the interest of student-athletes. And now fast forward, 21st Century, that still better be our job and our purpose. It still better be the thing that animates what we do.

So we need to have good answers to all of those questions and the many others that come with it. In fact, it's our job to answer those questions. None of them are insolvable, you know, none of them -- they're complicated but they're not insurmountable. This isn't brain surgery here. And if we're

going to build support for college sports, we've got to act on those issues and we've got to do it now. And act in ways that clarify our values and support the best interest of the student-athletes unequivocally. 2020 can't be a year of business as usual in that sense. We've got to double down on the opportunities that we provide to our students and those half a million young men and women that are part of this wonderful structure of college sports. And most importantly, we've got to be accountable to our student-athletes and to each other.

And we're best positioned to make those changes happen. You know, everyone in this room spends every day with student-athletes. Heck, we got a whole section over here of student-athletes, and it's been fun to watch the participation of students in this conference grow year after year after year. And so it's you all that see students first thing in the morning. You see 'em in the weight room, you see 'em in study hall, you see them after a game, you see them when they've won, you see them when they've lost. You, the people in this room, understand the ins and outs of the lives of student-athletes better than any outside group, that's for sure.

That's why we're in the best position to drive change for our student-athletes. But along with that, comes a responsibility that we act on the knowledge that we have. Yes, in some cases we need help from Congress and from some others. But this is our job, and we gotta be clear about it. This is ours to improve and make better in every way we can. We've got

to stay focused on what's best for our student-athletes in each of the decisions that we make in supporting the collegiate model of athletics.

That's what Dave did. He did it every day. You just said it beautifully. That's what we need to emulate. That's what we need to put in front of us every day, just like Dave Williams did.

So when we're making those choices, just as Gail was saying, when we're making those decisions, we gotta say, no, no, we're here for them. That's what we do. We don't need anybody else to tell us to look out for students' best interests. We're those representatives. That's the purpose of this Association.

As we go forward in the rest of these meetings, I want us all to keep that in mind. As we wrestle with the NIL issue and anything else that comes along, we need to keep that front and center with blinders on, what's good for our students, what helps them be successful, how are we going to make sure they get all the breaks they can in life going forward.

Thank you for your commitment to those students. Thank you, Gail, for being with us tonight. Thank you to all the student-athletes that are here helping us deal with the issues and work our way through them. It makes all the difference in the world.