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N.J. college athletes should be allowed to cash in on their names, lawmakers say

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State lawmakers advanced a bill Thursday that would allow college athletes in New Jersey to cash in on their fame, as part of a broader fight against the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

The Senate's Higher Education Committee approved the proposal, but it still needs to be voted on by the full Senate and Assembly before it can head to Gov. Phil Murphy's desk.

A similar proposal was never brought to a vote in the Senate at the end of the last legislative session, which ended on Jan. 14.

The bill (S971) would allow collegiate student-athletes in the state to earn money from their name or image, much in the same way professional athletes can.

They could also hire agents and lawyers without threatening their scholarship eligibility, although they would have to notify their universities about any contracts they signed. Students would be barred, however, from acting as spokespeople for companies selling alcohol, pornography, tobacco, guns or gambling.

The measure would also block schools from being part of any organization that didn't allow students to be compensated, which includes the NCAA. An NCAA board did give initial approval to changing its rules in October, but specifics still need to be worked out.

Proponents argue that allowing students to earn money through endorsements is only fair, since college sports generate billions of dollars every year.

The bill was partially intended to pressure the NCAA to develop its rules quickly, said state Sen. Joseph Lagana, D-Bergen, a bill sponsor. Having different guidelines across the country wasn't ideal, he told NJ Advance Media late last year, but this could pre-empt the NCAA from developing overly restrictive rules.

The proposal could have a particularly large impact on Rutgers, the state's largest university, which is currently spending millions to revitalize its football program. Dory Devlin, a Rutgers spokesperson, wrote in an email that the only way to properly address student compensation was through a national policy.

"State-by-state solutions are not workable when college athletes from one state are competing against college athletes from another," Devlin wrote.

California passed a similar law last year. In a previous statement, the NCAA criticized that bill “and other proposed measures” because it turns college athletes into “employees.”

“This directly contradicts the mission of college sports within higher education — that student-athletes are students first and choose to play a sport they love,” the statement read.

Opponents have also raised concerns about how money could corrupt the recruiting process. The NCAA did not return an earlier request for comment about New Jersey’s bill.

The measure was also sponsored by state Sen. Sandra Cunningham, D-Jersey City, and Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen.

The proposal would take effect five academic years after it was signed into law.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Brent Johnson contributed to this report.