

America loves college sports, but a new study shows that this entertainment comes at a high price to education

With uncanny timing, the University of Wisconsin announced a lavish new pay schedule for football coaches two days after publication of a study finding that major universities are spending more on sports than they are on education.

The study, by the Delta Cost Project of the American Institutes for Research, found that the Big Ten, in which UW competes, is among the conferences whose schools spend at least six times more on each athlete than they spend on educating each student.

It's not news that NCAA Division 1 athletic programs are hugely expensive enterprises, but the study's findings documenting the financial excesses of big-time college sports are eye-opening and troubling at a time when fast-rising tuition costs and other expenses are threatening to put college educations out of reach of many families.

Athletic spending in the so-called power conferences exceeded \$100,000 per athlete in 2010, compared to less than \$15,000 in academic spending for each full-time student, according to the Delta report.

The study confirmed that students help pay for the bloated athletic programs through the fees they pay. On average, students pay 7.6% of the cost of football programs, while another 10% comes from states and institutions. Televisions contracts and ticket sales provide the revenue to cover the remainder of the costs.

As if to validate the findings, the UW Board of Regents last week approved contracts that will pay the defensive and offensive coordinators of the UW football team \$480,000 a year each. That's for assistant coaches. The new head coach will get a contract paying him \$10 million over the next five years.

Not that the Wisconsin students and their families and taxpayers who contribute to those salaries should feel fortunate, but it could be worse. Wisconsin's former head coach, Bret Bielema, was paid \$2.6 million at Madison last year and is reported to be getting \$3.2 million in his new job this year as coach of the University of Arkansas football team.

Bielema said one of the reasons he quit Wisconsin was that the school did not pay his assistant coaches enough. Judging from the new assistants' paychecks that will be nearly double last year's, the regents took that to heart.

If the report is not provoking outrage it's because college football and basketball are a tremendously popular. The games are terrific entertainment that capture national audiences.

Rah, rah, spend, spend

Written by Ozaukee Press

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Defenders of major-league college sports point out that these programs enhance the reputations of schools, instill pride in student bodies and generate many millions of dollars in TV and ticket revenue.

All true, yet this comes at a cost that erodes the educational mission of colleges. As Donna Desrochers, author of the college sports spending report put it, “Public institutions with Division 1 athletic programs have continued to invest significant resources in athletics, even as academic budgets were under strain during the recent recession.”

Budgets have indeed been strained, and students have been asked to help relieve the strain by paying higher tuition. A bachelor’s degree today can easily cost a UW-Madison student more than \$60,000. Which means that some worthy students don’t get to attend this world-renowned (more so for its educational prowess than for its sports success) university and that many who can attend leave with burdensome debt.

That puts paying assistant coaches half a million dollars a year into a stark perspective.

A spokesman for the American Council on Education called the Delta report evidence that college athletic spending has become a “financial arms race” that will ultimately be unsustainable.

Unsustainable might be a good thing. It would give college presidents cover to rebalance spending and devote more resources to their institutions’ reason for existence, which is not to entertain football fans.