

Dayton Daily News

Students pay big for NCAA sports Escalating fees add to student debt. Many students in dark about how much they are paying.

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Saturday, March 28, 2015

By [Laura A. Bischoff](#) and [Jeremy P. Kelley](#) - Columbus bureau

Columbus — College students at 10 of Ohio’s biggest public universities are paying more than \$135 million for intercollegiate athletics through either mandatory fees or university subsidies — and most of the students don’t even know it.

Critics say heavily subsidizing athletics contributes to the escalating cost of college and piles on more student debt.

“College sports is a business, but it is a poorly, poorly run business because most everybody is losing money. Not just losing some money — they’re losing a lot of money. And it’s continually being subsidized through budget transfers, student fees and everything,” said B. David Ridpath, an associate professor of sports administration at Ohio University and a fellow at the Center for College Affordability and Productivity.

Miami University is a prime example of how fees to support athletic programs have escalated. A Miami student will pay \$3,988 for intercollegiate sports over four years, plus another \$520 for the Goggin Ice Center, which is used by the nationally ranked men’s hockey team and intramural teams. (Students are charged discount rates for open skate time.) Each Miami student pays an \$1,860-per-year general fee on top of tuition, with \$997 going to support a \$28.7 million annual athletics department that features 18 varsity teams.

Nathan Lombardi, a vice president in Miami student government, is heading a new student-led task force to study how the general fee is used and whether that lines up with student priorities. Lombardi noted that except for hockey, Miami has low attendance at its varsity team events.

“There are, including our university president, very ardent supporters that athletics has ‘immeasurable benefits,’ ” Lombardi said. “I’m a finance major, so I think everything can be measured. But I think they’re also distracting themselves from the fact that if they were to measure some of these benefits, they wouldn’t like the answer, so they’ve chosen not to.” Universities contend intercollegiate athletics build school pride, help bring in donations and boost a college’s profile.

“Whether you like it or not, athletics really does serve as one of our front doors to the community,” University of Cincinnati chief financial officer Bob Ambach said. “It’s a recruitment tool. It’s a tool by which we engage the community as well as our current students, faculty and staff and alumni. For a lot of institutions, including UC, having something for the UC community and the broader Cincinnati community to rally around serves as a good PR mechanism.”

That sentiment — that sports provides a substantial benefit to the college experience — is shared by other university administrators in Ohio.

“We had over 4,000 at a football game this year (and) I don’t know of any other single event that brings that many students together in one place at one time,” Miami University Athletics Director David Saylor said. “So, I just think it’s a rallying point for them and a chance to participate in something that, if we’re winning and doing things the right way, we’ll bring a lot of pride and support to the institution.”

But not many of Miami’s major sports teams are winning. While Miami’s hockey team is consistently excellent, the RedHawks men’s basketball team has had six straight losing seasons, the football team is 21-53 in that span (including 2-22 over the last two seasons), and women’s basketball has two winning records in six years.

Some schools, like Bowling Green State University, have raised fees to compensate for declining enrollment. At Bowling Green, \$12.7 million of the school’s \$18 million athletic budget comes from fees paid by its 15,461 students. Over a four-year college career, that adds up to a student paying \$3,290 in fees for intercollegiate athletics.

“Over the last five years BGSU has experienced a decline in enrollment,” University spokesman Dave Kielmeyer said in an email. “While we reduced funding in other areas that weren’t a direct benefit to students (like our public golf course), we have maintained the level of funding for university athletics.”

In a recent report on college affordability, the Ohio Conference of the American Association of University Professors says the escalation of student fees to support athletics programs raises troubling questions.

“We have to ask ourselves if the athletic expenditures are worthwhile, especially when students are the ones footing a substantial part of the bill, probably largely unknown to them,” the report says. “This is an issue of priorities and whether we are willing to say it is acceptable for students to accumulate thousands in debt over a four-year period to pay for athletic programs that neither make money nor are self-sustaining.”

Confusion over fees

Most students don’t know what their fees pay for, student government presidents from Miami, Ohio State and Wright State universities all said. Kyle Powell, student president at Wright State, said he tried to create a pie chart showing students how many cents of each tuition/fee dollar the university spends on each service, but he gave up because the project got too confusing.

Wright State’s tuition is below the state average for public universities, but officials acknowledged their \$1,148 per year general fee is not disclosed to students. The course catalog lumps tuition and the general fee together. In response to questions from this newspaper, WSU spokesman Seth Bauguess said the fee covers “non-instructional costs that support students in areas like Student Health Services, Counseling and Wellness, the Student Union, Athletics, Student Activities, etc.”

At Ohio State, even fees that have a specific purpose in their title can be misleading, said Celia Wright, OSU’s student government president. Student leaders worked with the university on an OSU rec sports fee that students believed was too high. Wright said the investigation proved them right, and the university later offered free fitness classes to students with the surplus profit. OSU students pay \$868.80 in fees each year for the Ohio Union, recreation center, bus pass, activities and other services, but the athletics program at the university is self-sustaining.

“The cost of education has increased much more in the arena of fees outside the classroom lately than it has in tuition,” Wright said. “Tuition is subject to a lot of scrutiny, so it has remained really pretty flat over the past few years in Ohio public schools. If they freeze tuition, and they don’t have additional support from the state, schools will leverage fees to cover that, and that’s really unfortunate.”

Fees can be difficult to track. The Ohio Board of Regents reports only mandatory fees that are assessed uniformly to all students. That data doesn’t include the fees Bowling Green charges undergraduates for its counseling center and career services because freshmen pay different rates than juniors, making the fees “nonuniform.”

Peeling back data on how much of the fees are used for athletics can be even

more challenging. Miami University, like most schools, does not itemize on its bills how funds from the general student fee are spent. The information is posted online, but it takes digging to find it.

Ridpath, a former assistant athletics director at Marshall University in West Virginia, said “it doesn’t sell well” that schools are hiking fees and increasingly leaning on students to “stay in this college (athletics) arms race. “It doesn’t look very good in the day and age of kids taking out a lot of money in loans,” he said.

According to the Project on Student Debt, 68 percent of those who graduated an Ohio college in 2013 had student loan debt, with an average debt load of \$29,090.

Out-sized impact

Fee structures vary greatly depending on the size of the school and its athletic program.

Schools in the “power five” conferences — Big Ten, SEC, ACC, Big 12, Pac12 — operate in a different financial stratosphere that includes TV contracts and sold out stadiums. The average subsidy in the Big Ten is \$61 per student, Ridpath found.

Ohio State’s athletics program generates \$139.6 million in revenues each year and returns a surplus to the university. Not a single dime of student fees, tax money or tuition dollars are used to subsidize the school’s 36 varsity sports.

But outside that exclusive world is a far different story. Eighty-five percent of Cleveland State University’s \$11.3 million athletics budget comes from academic sources such as student fees or school money. At the University of Cincinnati, 35 percent of the \$60 million athletics budget comes from school funds, according to data collected and maintained by USA Today. The data are self-reported by the universities to the NCAA.

Analysis of the data from USA Today shows that 10 of Ohio’s largest schools spent more than \$135 million in student fees or institutional money on intercollegiate sports.

Students often don’t know how much in fees they are paying, and rarely make their college choices based on a school’s sports program, according to a survey Ridpath conducted two years ago of 3,282 students at the six Ohio schools in the Mid-American Conference: Miami, Bowling Green, Ohio University, Kent State University, the University of Akron and the University of Toledo.

Nearly half said they would like to see the fee for intercollegiate athletics reduced, and 73 percent said college sports was unimportant in their decision to pick their university, the survey found.

Ridpath says college sports has a out-sized impact on campus spending decisions, and university leaders should consider slashing coaching salaries, ending the facilities building boom and dialing back on sports offerings. The University of Alabama-Birmingham made national news in December when it announced it would jettison its football program for financial reasons.

“Schools are going to have to look in the mirror and make some really, really hard choices,” Ridpath said. “I think they can make those hard choices without damaging the institution and still having viable intercollegiate athletic programs.”

Cost cuts, transparency urged

College affordability has gained the attention of Gov. John Kasich and legislative leaders, who are pushing public colleges and universities to address the issue.

The Ohio Senate is debating a bill that would require public colleges and universities to submit plans by Sept. 1 on how they could reduce in-state student costs by 5 percent. The bill, however, doesn't require that the institutions execute the plans.

Kasich also established a college affordability task force headed by Geoff Chatas, OSU's chief financial officer who just announced he is leaving the school for a job in the private sector.

Chatas said he'll recommend more transparency and an annual review for mandatory fees paid as well as getting student input when new fees are proposed.

“Transparency is the hallmark to me,” he said.

What they are saying

Bob Ambach, chief financial officer, University of Cincinnati: “Whether you like it or not, athletics really does serve as one of our front doors to the community. It's a recruitment tool. It's a tool by which we engage the community as well as our current students, faculty and staff and alumni. For a lot of institutions, including UC, having something for the UC community and the broader Cincinnati community to rally around serves as a good PR mechanism.”

B. David Ridpath, associate professor of sports administration at Ohio University and a fellow at the Center for College Affordability and Productivity: “Schools are going to have to look in the mirror and make some really, really hard choices. I think they can make those hard choices without damaging the institution and still having viable intercollegiate athletic programs.”

The Ohio Conference of the American Association of University Professors:
“This is an issue of priorities and whether we are willing to say it is acceptable for students to accumulate thousands in debt over a four-year period to pay for athletic programs that neither make money nor are self-sustaining.”