

OPINION EXCHANGE

Editorial counterpoint: Financial, Title IX realities drove U decision on sports

Cutting programs was a tough decision we wish we didn't have to make.

By Ken Powell and Steve Sviggum | DECEMBER 25, 2020 — 6:00PM

College athletics is experiencing fundamental changes and challenges across the country. The pandemic has added tremendous financial pressure to the policy judgments at stake.

According to ESPN, 352 NCAA sports programs have been cut since March. The University of Minnesota's painful decision in October to eliminate three sports proves we are not immune ("More clarity needed on U sports cuts," [December 19](https://www.startribune.com/more-clarity-is-needed-on-u-s-decision-to-cut-sports/573432051/) (<https://www.startribune.com/more-clarity-is-needed-on-u-s-decision-to-cut-sports/573432051/>)).

As all know, television, ticket and advertising revenue from football and men's basketball fuels college sports. What is underappreciated is how that revenue supports all of the other non-revenue-producing sports — and how that model is eroding.

Fan attendance is down nationwide. Student-athletes seek their fair share. Indeed, just last week the Supreme Court agreed to address student-athlete claims for additional benefits, which place traditional notions of amateurism center stage.

The pandemic takes its toll, of course, bringing safety concerns and plummeting revenue.

The financial calculus involves far more than the often-cited savings of \$1.6 million annually from cutting men's gymnastics, men's tennis, and men's indoor track and field.

Considering our pledge to honor the scholarships of the current student-athletes, the program savings grow to around \$2 million per year. More important, multimillion-dollar deficits find the Athletics Department bearing many other sacrifices: across-the-board 10% pay cuts, employee layoffs, and open positions going unfilled, to name a few. For the U, every action hurts and every dollar counts.

The U's commitment to women's athletics guides us as well. While financial concerns motivated the Athletic Department's recommendations, any change had to account for recent shifts in the U's student demographics, with women's percentage of the undergraduate student body now 53% strong.

This means the opportunities offered to our student-athletes must also shift to be truly equal — "meaningful participation" in all of its Title IX dimensions. It is a sensitive conversation, as those values did not require the U to cut men's sports. The Board of Regents could have directed the addition of two or three new women's programs instead. That, however, would mean at least \$3 million to \$4 million in additional annual expenditures to support the necessary scholarships, facilities, personnel and infrastructure. That is an option that the U cannot afford at this time.



AARON LAVINSKY • STAR TRIBUNE

University of Minnesota athletic director Mark Coyle recommended cuts to balance budget.

ADVERTISEMENT

Title IX and the values it stands for carry legal teeth. Courts and the U.S. Department of Education repeatedly remind universities in Minnesota and elsewhere of the rigor behind those proscriptions. The recent program cuts were necessarily shaped by that values-based discipline.

Efforts by Gophers boosters to save these programs are to be commended. Unfortunately, however, we are not talking about a one-time expense. The finance and Title IX math is \$2 million plus \$4 million, for a total of \$6 million — year after year. Such a significant recurring annual expense would require boosters to privately raise a very substantial endowment, likely more than \$100 million.

Called upon to shoulder tough choices, athletic director Mark Coyle recommended the cuts, which will find us with 22 sports offerings next academic year rather than 25. Beyond individual program budgets and Title IX arithmetic, he rightfully considered our overall annual athletics budget of around \$120 million and Minnesota's place among our peer institutions.

It is true that Ohio State, Michigan and Penn State carry more sports, for example, but they fill 100,000-seat stadiums and bring in up to \$200 million in annual revenue. Coyle must evaluate why 80 Division I sports have been dropped across the country in this year alone. He also had to consider that only 15 Division I men's gymnastics programs remained, and that the board, after hearing from the student-athletes who were losing indoor track, agreed that the university should stretch to preserve the outdoor track experience.

We appreciate that many called for a different balance than the one struck by the Board of Regents. We respect your perspective. Please know we made this decision with care. The athletic director announced his recommendations in early September for all to hear at the same time, with notice long before the decisions take hold for the 2021-22 academic year. The board discussed the competing considerations at its September and October meetings, with members sharing their passion and concerns for the different points of view.

On behalf of the university, we renew our pledge to Minnesotans to continue to exercise our fiduciary responsibilities in a manner true to our duty to serve the public and the university community. At times, this duty finds us making decisions we wish we did not have to make.

Ken Powell is chair and Steve Sviggum is vice chair of the University of Minnesota Board of Regents.

