

“Cracking the Nut,” Part 10

This communication is a follow-up to our letter about athletics spending. If you have not endorsed it, please consider doing so asap.)

I have received several e-mails suggesting that we should not be focusing singularly or even pointedly on the athletics budget.

Just to be clear, AAUP-WSU is asserting that an inexplicable priority is being given to athletics in the proposed cuts just announced, but it is hardly the only concern that we have about the budget--or that we have expressed over the last 18-24 months. We will shortly be distributing a communication on the fact that the 19 semi-autonomous units are not mentioned at all in the calculations to save \$30 million. Are we to assume that those units have suddenly become self-supporting when for the last half-decade they have required heavy subsidies from the university's general revenues--with the costs amounting to at least a third of the \$120 million in reserves that have vanished in the space of a handful of years?

Last spring, an administrator stopped me in the hall and expressed some surprise at an earlier AAUP communication on the cost of intercollegiate athletics. She observed that when the basketball team made it into the NCAA tournament, there was "such good feeling on campus--and it seemed to last for months." I pointed out that that was some years ago and asked rhetorically whether those months of good feeling were worth \$70+ million. But then I added that, under "normal" circumstances, athletics spending would be less of a big deal, but what is very clear is that the university cannot afford to run similar deficits on a half-dozen things, none of which have ended up producing any of the revenue or other benefits that have been promised.

So, yes, the AAUP has a history of opposing open-ended spending on athletics, and it is a concern shared statewide because only Ohio State does not very heavily subsidize athletics. We are not so much anti-athletics as pointedly aware that very little consideration is ever given to how that money might be spent to recruit and retain students and to enhance the academic experience. We are as concerned about administrative bloat and the spending on other non-academic initiatives as we are about the spending on athletics. And we are concerned not simply because we would like to see faculty fairly compensated for their work but because there seems to be money for just about anything other than academics.

The salaries and benefits of all teaching faculty now account on average for just over 20% of university budgets, and all expenditures on instruction are seldom more than 35% of those budgets. This past fall, the administration at WSU began citing figures that our academic spending was among the highest per student in the state. But that calculation included administrative costs at the college level and below (where we rank near the top in the state), as well as the creation of the duplicative service units at the college and even department levels--and it appears to have included even the spending

on WSRI and WSARC as well, because they are categorized as research support. So much of what has been draining money from direct spending on instruction was presented as if it were supporting instruction.

In sum, I think that this latest communication from AAUP-WSU needs to be considered in the context of our other two dozen communications on the budget over the past 15 to 18 months.

But before closing this communication, I would like to return to an earlier point.

Several weeks ago, you received a newsletter from the Ohio Conference of AAUP, summarizing John McNay's testimony before the Ohio House on several controversial measures affecting faculty that have been inserted into the House budget bill. His testimony was about 15 minutes long, but he answered questions from legislators for another 45 minutes or so.

One of those legislators prefaced his questions with the comment that John had already established our opposition to the spending on intercollegiate athletics—that he did not understand how we could be so adamantly opposed to extracurricular activities when they have been shown to have such a positive impact on student engagement and performance.

This comment seems to me to reflect a broader misconception about intercollegiate athletics. Although the large crowds at Big Ten games might be framed as an extracurricular activity, Ohio State's athletics program is the only one in the state that is entirely self-supporting—that is revenue neutral, that does not require at least \$10 million of several tens of millions of dollars in subsidies from the universities' general funds. Almost all of the teams in the Mid-American Conference are at the bottom of the rankings for attendance at football games. So, if attending games is an extracurricular activity, it is not an especially popular one.

At several of those Ohio universities, the cost of intercollegiate athletics has been calculated at more than \$800 per full-time student per year. In contrast, one often hears assertions about the free news coverage and other benefits of Division I athletics programs, but if there are studies substantiating those assertions, they are very seldom if ever cited.

The most spectacular intramural sports program in the nation could be provided to our students at a fraction of the current cost of intercollegiate athletics. And although it is true that some of the cost of athletics is for the scholarships provided to student athletes, administration accounts for a comparable share of the athletics budget. So, clearly, merit and need-based scholarships could be provided to twice the number of students currently on athletics-related scholarships if the revenue now spent on administration of the athletics programs were simply directly to broader student scholarships.

I am not suggesting, however, that intercollegiate athletics *must* be eliminated. I am simply trying to make the case for the obvious--that when an institution is facing the kinds of fiscal issues that our university is currently facing, treating intercollegiate athletics as some sort of sacred cow is irresponsible. The place of intercollegiate athletics at our university needs some serious, thoughtful discussion. But what we have heard from the McCray administration is not appreciably different than what we have heard from the Hopkins administration: yes, changes to intercollegiate athletics might be considered, but in the future. These sorts of assurances are very similar to the empty promises about the semi-autonomous units' becoming self-sustaining (never mind their actually producing revenue for the university).

Meanwhile, substantial cuts are being made in the college budgets, and while relatively few currently filled faculty positions have been eliminated, the number that have been eliminated due to attrition continues to grow. And that decline in full-time faculty positions will have very direct impacts on our students, our faculty, and the perception of our university, particularly among prospective students.