

Non-athletes subsidizing college sports

By Sean Gregory, Time

What ticks off many college students even more than an 8am class? Finding out how much they pay for sports.

B. David Ridpath, a professor of sports administration at Ohio University and a former president of the Drake Group, a college-sports watchdog organization, just finished polling about 4,000 students attending schools in the Mid-American Conference (MAC), a group of a dozen public institutions mostly in Ohio and Michigan. He asked if they knew that a significant chunk of their annual student fees – payments on top of tuition that fund various student services – helped finance their school's intercollegiate athletic department. For example, at Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio, \$950 of a student's \$1,796 annual fee, or half the payment, funds athletic scholarships, coaches' salaries and other sports-related spending.

Some 40 percent of respondents said they were totally unaware that their fees funded sports. And even those who knew about the payments were in the dark about exactly how much of the fee went to athletics.

"Ridiculous," wrote one MAC student in the comments section of the survey. It was a familiar refrain: "I pay a ridiculous amount for events I don't attend." "I'm here to learn, not to watch sports." "My feelings with this news stretch no shorter than outrage."

When the men's 68-team NCAA Division I basketball championship, aka March Madness, tips off today, the nonstop television coverage, full of ecstatic crowds and handsomely compensated coaches roaming the sidelines, might create the

impression that sports programs shower their schools in cash. But in the vast majority of cases, the opposite is true.

Money from students – and taxpayers – subsidizes sports. According to *USA Today*, of 227 public institutions playing Division 1 sports, just 22 have self-sufficient athletic departments. (These include the revenue-generating machines at the University of Texas, Ohio State and Florida.)

What's more, even in the face of ever tighter budgets and ever escalating costs for students, the subsidies keep soaring. According to a January report from the American Institutes for Research, athletic subsidies per athlete at public schools with top-tier football teams spiked 61 percent from 2005 to 2010. Meanwhile, per-student academic spending rose just 23 percent.

President Obama has promised to tackle rising college costs.

“Let me put colleges and universities on notice,” he said in January. “If you can't stop tuition from going up, the funding you get from taxpayers will go down.”

College-sports reformers acknowledge that steps like reining in coaching salaries, offering fewer football scholarships and streamlining athletic administration won't solve the affordability crisis.

Still, “it's a logical starting point,” Ridpath says. “These levels of spending are not sustainable.”

Sports budgets in the MAC average \$23.2 million and rose 29 percent from 2006 to 2011, according to *USA Today*; they are 75 percent funded through subsidies. Notwithstanding the president's warning, don't bet on immediate changes.

“There's tremendous student engagement through participation in athletics, through support of athletics,” says George Ross, president of Central Michigan University.

And sports can raise a school's profile. Kent State, whose baseball team reached the College World Series in June, projects a 51 percent increase in applications from 2010 to 2013. Is there empirical proof that sports drove this growth?

"We haven't done a study here," says Kent State athletic director Joel Nielsen. "But with our visibility in baseball and football and basketball, just common sense would tell you it did."

Luis Proenza, president of the University of Akron, whose men's basketball team enjoyed a 19-game winning streak this season, offers a final word on college-sports spending.

"I would say to most people, Don't get too worried about it, and enjoy what it does bring to our campuses, our society. It's a tremendous learning opportunity for student athletes. For many of them, it's a ticket to a higher education. And understand that this is just one of many social, human institutions that—because they are human—are not perfect."

Who pays for that imperfection? You.