

EDUCATION

With Budgets Under Pressure, Colleges Cut Country-Club Staples Like Golf and Tennis

Sports lose varsity status in wake of Covid-19 cash crunch; schools rethink optics of costly, overwhelmingly white teams



Stanford University recently said it would eliminate co-ed and women's sailing, among other teams.

PHOTO: SUSANA BATES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By [Melissa Korn](#)

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Colleges eager to cut costs amid a financial crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic have settled on an easy target: low-profile sports that don't draw many spectators, attract a disproportionate number of white or foreign athletes and are relatively pricey to operate.

Schools ranging from highly selective private institutions like Stanford University to public institutions including the University of Connecticut and the University of Akron are scrapping varsity teams for sports such as rowing, fencing, tennis and squash.

The teams have small rosters and require expensive facilities. They also don't make money for their schools. Dartmouth College, which is eliminating its golf program, will

also shutter the Hanover Country Club after losing more than \$1 million annually on the property.

Football and men's basketball, which tend to be the biggest revenue drivers for Division I college athletics thanks to TV broadcast deals and ticket sales, aren't being cut, though their fall schedules are shifting due to public health concerns.

Many universities are expecting lower tuition revenue as families face their own financial crises. They are also spending heavily on personal protective gear to try to bring at least some students back to campus safely this fall.

"Had Covid-19 not happened, we may have looked at one or two sports, not four," said Jon Gilbert, the athletic director at East Carolina University, which announced in late May it would eliminate men's and women's swimming and diving and men's and women's tennis.

Forty-one percent of athletic departments in the nation's richest athletic conferences, known as the Power Five, have a financial reserve for times of crisis, while just 26% of those in the mid-major conferences known as the Group of Five do, according to a survey this spring of more than 100 athletic directors by LEAD1 Association, which represents program directors in the Football Bowl Subdivision, and Teamworks, an athlete engagement platform. More than one-third of respondents expected revenue to drop by at least 30% in the 2020-21 academic year.

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Tennis, with its high-maintenance indoor and outdoor courts and small rosters, has suffered among the biggest losses in recent weeks. Wright State University, Southern Utah University, the University of Northern Colorado, Winthrop University, the University of Akron and the University of Connecticut are among those cutting tennis programs.

Golf has been another major target.

Steve Dittmore, a professor of recreation and sport management at the University of Arkansas, said schools seem to be taking into account roster sizes, fan interest and the logistics of operating teams where competitors may not be close by. Per-player expenses

can be thousands of dollars higher in squash than in track and field, for example, he said, making the former a prime candidate for the chopping block.

Even the nation's wealthiest schools are feeling the crunch, a reminder that many athletic programs operate on thin margins. Last week Stanford said it would eliminate 11 teams, including co-ed and women's sailing, men's and women's fencing, field hockey, lightweight rowing, men's rowing, squash and synchronized swimming.

The school had been supporting 36 varsity teams—double the average for Division I programs—and its athletic department was operating at a deficit for several years before the pandemic. Stanford projected an athletics deficit of at least \$25 million for fiscal 2021, in light of the pandemic and recession, and a total \$70 million shortfall over the next three years.

A number of institutions have also noted the need to maintain roughly equal opportunities for male and female athletes, as required by Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972. For schools with big football squads, the balancing can be difficult.

Colleges have cut around 300 more men's roster spots than women's spots in the recent spate of downsizing, according to Dr. Dittmore's calculations.

And then there is optics. At a time when racial justice and diversity have become a more open national conversation, the sports being eliminated are ones that tend to draw overwhelmingly white, often wealthy players. Stanford referenced student diversity as one of the factors it considered when deciding which teams to cut.

Fifty-six percent of Division I athletes in the 2018-19 school year were white, according to the NCAA, roughly in line with the overall student population at those schools. But 70% of men on college golf teams, 72% of women rowers and almost 90% of women equestrians are white.

Brown University, which began a review before the pandemic and announced in late May that 11 varsity programs would be demoted to club status, ultimately backtracked on its plan to cut its men's cross-country, indoor and outdoor track and field teams, citing the impact their absence would have on Black athletes. Women's skiing and equestrian, and men's and women's golf, fencing and squash, are still being downgraded.

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In the wake of the [Varsity Blues college admissions cheating scandal](#), colleges also have faced scrutiny for just how much preference they give to athletes in admissions, including in sports like rowing and sailing.

In announcing its cuts last week, Dartmouth College referenced financial challenges—and the fact that the school is a lot harder to get into these days, and setting aside so many slots for recruited athletes may no longer be justified.

“Athletic recruitment at Dartmouth has begun to impact our ability to achieve the right balance between applicants who are accomplished in athletics and applicants who excel in other pursuits,” President Philip Hanlon wrote to the school community last week. By eliminating five of its 35 teams, the school is reducing the number of recruited athletes in each entering class by 10%.

Zack Doherty, a 2013 Dartmouth graduate and former swim team captain, was offended by Dartmouth’s statement about needing to cut sports to free up spots for other students, as if they’d be more qualified to attend. “It was really just a slap in the face,” he said.

Dartmouth’s swimming and diving teams have gathered more than 29,000 signatures on a petition asking the school to reconsider the program’s elimination.

A Dartmouth spokeswoman said the school appreciates the passions of current and former athletes, but “petitions will not change the reality of the current circumstances, nor will they reveal anything we don’t already know.”

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