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## Student interest, or lack thereof, drives change in two-year college athletics

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After nearly 20 years, sports are returning to Florida SouthWestern State College.

The two-year college on Florida's Gulf Coast is investing in a new arena to host games played by its volleyball and men's and women's basketball teams. They've partnered with county officials to offer baseball and softball at a nearby facility formerly used for Major League Baseball spring training. They've also hired coaches and a new athletic director, all in hopes of boosting the new program and catering to students who want a more traditional college atmosphere.

Meanwhile, more than 1,300 miles west of Florida, faculty, staff and students at Northwest Arkansas Community College took a pass on a proposal <sup>[1]</sup> to begin an athletic program.

There simply wasn't enough interest.

Across the country, many two-year colleges are turning to their students and examining whether or not athletic programs fit the profile of their institutions. When there is a lack of student interest, it can be hard for colleges to justify the cost of running the programs, which are often expensive.

"Administrators reviewed feedback from many people within the institution and from stakeholders in our community, and we concluded that the timing is not right," said Evelyn Jorgenson, president of Northwest Arkansas Community College, in an email. The college's board decided not to start an athletic program last week.

Officials at the college, which has about 8,000 full- and part-time students, said an athletic program would cost at least \$150,000 a year, so instead they'll focus on club sports.

Student interest wasn't high at Eastern Maine Community College (EMCC), either.

That college is placing its athletic program on hiatus for a year to re-evaluate which sports to offer and how to boost student excitement about them.

"Community colleges nationwide have had a lot of growth, and we're the same way -- our enrollment growth was strong over the last four years, so you assume athletics would

grow as well, but it's not like that at all here," said Matt McLaughlin, a spokesman for EMCC.

The college's enrollment has increased from about 2,300 full-time students in 2011 to 2,600 last fall. Yet only 68 students participated in the college's 12 athletic programs, he said.

Eastern Maine is maintaining its membership in the Yankee Small College Conference and the United States Collegiate Athletic Association, so it can seamlessly return to sports in the 2016-17 academic year.

Lackluster student interest isn't the only thing impacting athletic programs: Western Nevada College will shut down its baseball and softball <sup>[2]</sup> teams next year because of a lack of funding. The college had about 50 students participating in a program that cost more than \$400,000 per year to operate.

Despite colleges adding or removing a program here or there, the number of community college athletic programs has remained fairly steady for decades. This past school year there were 509 colleges offering sports for men and 504 for women. For men, that number is down from the high of 534 colleges in 1992-93 and a high of 506 for women in 2013-14, according to membership numbers for the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA), which has a total of 525 member colleges.

However, those numbers don't give a full picture of two-year colleges that offer sports programs. Many, like EMCC, belong to other regional or state athletic associations that are not affiliated with NJCAA.

And the change in numbers doesn't necessarily mean two-year colleges are dropping athletics altogether.

"We haven't had a tremendous decline in the past five years. There's actually been an increase of schools in North Carolina and Virginia," said Mary Ellen Leicht, executive director of NJCAA. "Sometimes when a school drops they drop for a number of reasons... They become members of the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association]."

Or schools can put their programs on hiatus, like EMCC, she said.

"We're keeping a close watch on the Nevada, Idaho and Utah area, because there have been a couple of programs that have chosen to drop sports or athletics," she said, adding that the distance to travel in that region can be burdensome for some programs.

Certain sports are also more expensive than others. Ice hockey has become very expensive for colleges and many are moving toward club hockey instead of varsity teams. Club sports may use coaches and hold practices, but aren't as time intensive as varsity sports. But basketball, softball, baseball and soccer continue to see consistent numbers, Leicht said.

## Growing Sports

Hawkeye Community College, in Waterloo, Iowa, is phasing in a new athletic program this fall <sup>[3]</sup>.

The college will start with coed sports shooting and eventually plans to include soccer, outdoor track and field, cross-country, golf and bowling, all by 2019.

Administrators consistently heard from prospective students that they were interested in attending a place that offered sports, said Kathy Flynn, vice president of institutional advancement at Hawkeye, which has about 5,300 students.

The college will look at existing campus facilities and potentially partner with local businesses, like bowling alleys, to host events, she said. The college's governing board also will consider a fee increase on students to help support the burgeoning athletic program.

Florida SouthWestern, which has more than 20,000 students, will rely on fund-raising as well as student fees to fund its new athletic program.

The college's student activity fee is set at \$8.13 per credit hour and by state law can't exceed 10 percent of tuition rates. The fee is projected to bring in \$2.1 million in revenue next year for athletics and other student activities, said Teresa Morgenstern, a spokeswoman for Florida SouthWestern.

But the college also received a \$5 million gift from the state's largest credit union to build an arena that will seat 3,300 people and house three full-size basketball courts, six suites, locker rooms and training facilities. The project is expected to cost a total of \$24 million, said Carl McAloose, the newly hired athletic director.

"[President Jeff] Allbritten has been here about three years and he made the decision to round out the college experience. We just put in some new residence halls and bringing back athletics was a part of that," McAloose said. "He's right. It's amazing momentum... to see the pride students have taken around the entire county and region has been amazing."

The college also entered into a 10-year lease for the former Boston Red Sox training facility north of the campus to host the softball and baseball teams for \$24,000 a year, he said.

Eventually, the college will consider adding more sports, like golf. McAloose has experience building programs -- he helped establish athletics at four-year neighbor Florida Gulf Coast University, which saw a boost in attention and enrollment after its men's basketball team became a Cinderella story in the 2013 NCAA tournament.

He says he doesn't see the new athletic program taking away resources or attention from the college's academic program. If anything, it will attract students who would have never looked at the college as a place to further their education.

"If you ask the students, almost 99 percent would say this is a positive thing," he said. "Athletics can make your diploma more valuable or lessen it. In our case, with more popularity and more people knowing about our institution, it's become more valuable."

NJCAA College Membership Numbers

Community Colleges [4]

Year	Men	Women
2000-01	503	480
2001-02	499	476
2002-03	513	484

2003-04	491	473
2004-05	495	477
2005-06	496	476
2006-07	509	498
2007-08	515	501
2008-09	509	492
2009-10	511	492
2010-11	517	502
2011-12	518	500
2012-13	514	504
2013-14	513	506
2014-15	509	504

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.4029tv.com/news/northwest-arkansas-community-college-wont-move-forward-with-sports-program/32990210>

[2] <http://www.recordcourier.com/sports/15185183-113/carson-citys-western-nevada-college-to-shut-down-baseball-softball>

[3] <http://www.hawkeyecollege.edu/articles/news-releases/hawkeye-to-begin-offering-intercollegiate-athletics-in-2015.aspx>

[4] [https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/community\\_colleges](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/community_colleges)

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