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## As Costs of Sports Rise, Students Balk at Fees



Keith Kountz/California State University, Fresno, left; Cheryl Gerber for The New York Times

Left, Athletic fees at Fresno State rose to \$32 a semester, from \$7. Businessmen pledged \$2 million to save the University of New Orleans's sports programs after students rejected a fee increase.

By JERÉ LONGMAN  
Published: May 29, 2009

In late April, students rebuffed the financially troubled athletic department at the University of New Orleans. They voted against a fee increase to help pay for varsity sports, leaving the university to consider dropping baseball, basketball and every other sport.

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Battered by [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005 and now whipsawed by state budget cuts during a recession, university officials began scrambling to keep the athletics program out of mothballs. A [group of businessmen](#), led by [George Shinn](#), the owner of the [New Orleans Hornets](#), pledged to raise \$2 million by July 1 to keep the teams playing.

Since March, students at three California universities — Sacramento State, Long Beach State and Cal State Fullerton — have also voted down fee increases to help pay for athletics. Last year, students at [Fresno State](#) voted against a rise in athletic fees, but the university's president imposed a modified increase anyway. As athletic costs rise at a rate that the [N.C.A.A.](#) warns cannot be sustained, and as states continue to reduce spending on higher education, many athletic departments are seeking income beyond ticket sales, booster donations and television revenue to help stem the flow of red ink.

Students seem less inclined to pick up the tab, especially at universities that do not field major-college football teams.

"I couldn't afford the increase they were asking for," said Roberto Torres, the president-

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elect of student government at Sacramento State, where athletic fees would have gradually doubled to \$250 a year if the vote in April had passed. "When you see the cost of living going up and the cost of education going up, it's difficult to raise fees for extracurricular activities such as sports."

Besides, Mr. Torres said of Sacramento State athletics, "I just don't think students care too much about it, because they're not winning the big games."

Already facing steep tuition costs, students seem to be growing more reluctant to pay additional fees for everything from athletics to health care to transportation, according to the [United States Student Association](#), which is based in Washington.

"We're definitely seeing in recent times students refusing to pay a lot of these fees," said Bill Shiebler, national field director for the association. "There is a spectrum of reasons, ranging from 'I think it costs too much to go to school here' to 'I don't want to support any new fees' to 'I just don't want to have my dollars go to athletics because I don't use it.'"

The N.C.A.A. said it did not keep data on such fees. Newspaper surveys in recent years have indicated that more than half of Division I universities rely on student athletic fees, which can range from \$30 a year to more than \$1,000. Fee increases must be put to a vote at some universities; at others, officials consult students because the money they contribute makes them the equivalent of an important private donor.

Universities where students recently voted down fee increases seem to have a couple of things in common: They are primarily commuter colleges, where students may be less invested in sports; and they either do not compete in major football conferences or do not have football, which is the largest revenue sport.

"Midmajors like us, Division I without football, we're really struggling; student fees make a huge difference," said Vic Cegles, the athletic director at Long Beach State, where students [voted down a proposed annual \\$190 increase](#) in March. "We need facilities. We have a top-25 baseball team, but our kids have no locker room. I don't know how much longer we can compete under those conditions."

Not all the votes are binding, in part because relatively few students tend to cast ballots.

In April 2008, in a general fee referendum, students at Fresno State voted, 777-412, against raising athletic fees to \$50 per semester, from \$7. Based on a recommendation from a campus fee advisory committee, John D. Welty, the Fresno State president, overrode the vote and [approved an increase](#) to \$32 per semester for the 2008-9 academic year.

Mr. Welty said the \$1.4 million raised from the fee increase was primarily used to [add two women's sports](#), lacrosse and swimming.

"The issue for us was to make sure we continued our commitment to gender equity," Mr. Welty said.

Other universities have shown a greater willingness to vote for increases. Last year, students at North Texas approved a [per-credit-hour athletic fee](#) of up to \$300 a year to help pay for a new football stadium. Many current students will not have to pay the fee, which goes into effect when the stadium opens, probably in 2011.

Two months ago, students at Utah State [voted to increase their yearly athletic fee](#) to \$243, from \$113, to help cover a \$2.3 million deficit in the operation of varsity sports. Scott Barnes, the athletic director, said officials sought to persuade students that competitive athletics would increase enrollment, donations and visibility.

"Athletics are the front porch of the university," Mr. Barnes said. "It's not the most important room in the house, but it is the most visible."

Last month, students at New Orleans voted on the very survival of the athletic

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department, which has an approximately \$4 million annual budget and expenses of about \$5 million. The university has lost a third of its enrollment (now about 11,000) since Katrina and faces a state budget cut of \$15.3 million for the next fiscal year. About \$1.4 million of that reduction is proposed to come from money given to the athletic department from the university's general fund.

To counter the shortfall, officials sought to double New Orleans's student athletic fee to a little less than \$400 a year. [The vote failed](#), 1,418-1,251. Eric Gallatin, president of student government, said students were already facing a tuition increase and were reluctant to give more money to athletics when academic programs faced cuts.

"Why contribute to athletics when they can seek out other revenue such as sponsors, which they haven't seemed to do?" Mr. Gallatin said.

One of the university's basketball recruits has asked to be released from his commitment because of the financial instability, but officials have declined, saying it would set a "dangerous precedent."

The university faces the eventual challenge of adding six sports to equal [the 15 it had before Katrina](#), so it can remain in Division I (which requires a minimum of 14). That would cost an additional \$2 million annually, said Jim Miller, the New Orleans athletic director.

Wright Waters, the commissioner of the Sun Belt Conference, which includes New Orleans among its members, said: "They're like a guy sitting at the blackjack table all night who hasn't seen a face card yet. How many more cards can they be dealt?"

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