



College athletics spending: Comparing different schools

Interactive Photo gallery

Small athletics budgets makes NCAA Division I play a challenge

By Erin Durkin, USA TODAY

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When a leak appeared in Mississippi Valley State's gym roof and warped the floor, basketball practice became impossible just as the 2010-11 season was getting under way.

The displaced Delta Devils — who had made the NCAA men's basketball tournament three years before — loaded into vans to practice at a middle school 20 minutes away.

It took four months to find money to repair the floor. Meanwhile, the Devils embarked upon an early-season schedule that included several of the nation's top hoops schools: Indiana, Butler, Kentucky, Marquette. They lost all four of those games (and many others), but it was enough to earn \$800,000 in guarantees. And more than enough for a new floor.

"We are the lowest in the totem pole in resources and finances," says Sean Woods, the departing men's basketball coach at the 2,000-student school two hours north of Jackson, Miss. "We can't compare to anyone else in the country."

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Actually, Mississippi Valley has small, but lively, company in the NCAA Division I budget basement, which includes North Carolina-Asheville and Maryland-Eastern Shore — other schools that have made their athletics programs out of scrappy teams and playing for guarantees. MVSU and UNC-Asheville made the 2012 NCAA men's basketball

tournament, Asheville doing so for a second consecutive season. UMES recently won its second consecutive NCAA women's bowling championship.

These schools get their guarantee money playing penthouse-dwellers such as Texas, which had a budget of more than \$134 million in 2011. MVSU's entire athletics budget of \$4 million for the year was less than Texas paid football coach Mack Brown.

outline_credit>By Greg Bartram, US Presswire /outline_credit> 252> bold>Learning to be creative: /bold> Former Mississippi Valley State coach Sean Woods knows the challenge of being outspent by bigger schools. 252> 252>

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The megadisparity is emblematic of the fight between the haves and the have-nots in [Division I](#), where money-making programs such as Texas' generated a median surplus of \$9 million in 2011, and schools such as MVSU — even with their scaled-down programs — saw a median deficit for athletics of more than \$8 million.

Having a football program doesn't seem to help. The biggest deficits in 2011 belonged to the [Football Bowl Subdivision](#) schools whose conferences don't automatically send a team to the Bowl Championship Series; their median deficit was \$14 million.

Programs that don't earn enough in ticket sales, licensing and other revenue have to rely on their universities or student fees to fill the gap.

Risky investment

Though UMES hasn't had a football team in more than 30 years, its football field still takes up a huge part of its campus more than two hours southeast of Baltimore. With goal posts on the field leaning and the old ticket booth wrapped in caution tape, some of the school's 3,600 students use the track around the field to practice. But that surface is too dilapidated for the track and field teams to use for outdoor meets. Athletics department spokesman Stan Bradley said school officials declined to comment.

Support for sports programs has declined considerably over the years, says Kirkland Hall, UMES alum, former athletics director and coach of the school's softball, baseball and men's basketball teams.

"Because we don't have a football team anymore, the students don't really get excited about the sports," he says. "Even when we do well, the cheering is not as loud as it could be."

To generate more income, some schools have built new facilities — at best a risky investment. Last year, UNC-Asheville completed the 3,200-seat Kimmel Arena for its basketball teams, nearly tripling the number of seats it had in the old [Justice Center](#), which was one of Division I's smallest gyms. Combined with the men's basketball team's 24-9 record in the 2011-12 season, the fan base has surged.

UNC-Asheville still has to depend on community facilities for some events, including night baseball games; the tennis team plays on a local hotel's courts.

And while the community's support of the athletics program has increased recently — revenue from tickets to sports events has nearly tripled since 2005, even before Kimmel Arena was completed — inconsistent revenue overall can plague lower-financed programs, especially when their football and men's basketball teams don't win.

Mississippi Valley State's men's basketball team had a 17-game winning streak in conference play this past season, but its football team — which produced [NFL](#) great Jerry Rice in the 1980s — won one game in 2011.

UMES' men's basketball team has never played in the NCAA tournament, and it went 7-23 this past season.

Coaches get creative

Part of this struggle is attributed to the challenge of recruiting athletes to schools with such small sports budgets. Coaches must find creative ways to attract prospects.

"You have to sell (the athletes) on the fact that they get their turn early on as freshmen. We will be giving them time to play on the court, unlike the bigger schools," UNC-Asheville men's basketball coach [Eddie Biedenbach](#) says.

MVSU coaches try to recruit players who have good grades so they can be admitted on academic scholarships, and the school tries to keep recruiting in state to keep recruiting and scholarship costs down, says athletic director Donald R. Sims.

But playing for a small-budget school can have drawbacks that go beyond the field. At MVSU, athletic-scholarship recipients must give the school any [Pell Grant](#) money they

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receive, applying it toward the athletics department's cost of the scholarship, says football coach Karl Morgan, who adds other schools have used this requirement to compete against MVSU for recruits.

NCAA rules allow scholarship athletes to keep Pell Grant money, as long as the total combined value of the scholarship — tuition, mandatory fees, room, board and books — and the Pell Grant don't exceed the school's cost of attendance.

At small-budget schools, head coaches often have to do the work of a larger school's entire staff.

"Eighty percent of my job is not basketball. I have to deal with kids' scholarship information ... dorms, food, anything you can think of," says Woods, who played at men's basketball power Kentucky. "My assistants have to teach to supplement their income."

Presented with an opportunity to move to a more attractive job, Woods announced Monday that he was leaving for the head coaching job at Morehead State University in Kentucky, which spends twice as much as Valley.

Schools have the option to move down to the NCAA's [Division II](#), where they would play schools that more evenly match them in budget. But most coaches and students think it is far better to remain in Division I, despite the costs and the overwhelming challenges of competing against better-funded programs.

"Even though we might not have everything, we have everything we need to play football. This made us tougher men and tougher players," said [Paul Cox](#), a wide receiver for MVSU who recently signed with the NFL's San Diego Chargers.

Schools say dropping to Division II destroys the cachet of playing in a top league.

"Staying in Division I is a huge benefit; it brings a lot of attention to our small school," UNC-Asheville athletics director Janet Cone says.

"How do you put a price tag on getting your school recognized on a national level?"

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