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Two-year colleges in Arizona consider cutting football after five institutions drop sport

Submitted by Ashley A. Smith on November 30, 2018 - 3:00am

For the second time in its history, the Pima Community College Aztecs will play in a football bowl game hosted by the National Junior College Athletic Association.

But the Aztecs' appearance this weekend in the C.H.A.M.P.S. Heart of Texas Bowl will be Pima's last game.

The community college, which is located in Arizona, decided in [June](#) ^[1] to cut football, citing the expense of the program. That decision followed a similar one by the Maricopa County Community College District to eliminate football programs next year at its Phoenix, Scottsdale, Mesa and Glendale colleges. Now other two-year institutions in Arizona are questioning whether they can maintain football programs in the Western States Football League, which only has three teams left with Eastern Arizona, Arizona Western and Snow College in Utah.

"We have to decide now what to do with this league. Is it viable and is it worth it for us to pay to do so?" said Todd Haynie, president of Eastern Arizona. "Football has been around since 1920 at the college so it's a part of us ... I hate we have to come to this conversation, and we have to talk about it, but it's something that was given to us."

The Arizona Legislature and governor [eliminated all state funding](#) ^[2] for Pima and Maricopa in 2015. Since then the two districts have [struggled](#) ^[3] with declining enrollments and budgets.

Leaders of the four Maricopa colleges weighed the costs of maintaining insurance premiums and stadium facilities for their football programs before ultimately deciding they were too expensive, said Matt Hasson, a spokesman for the district.

Maricopa pays an overall annual insurance premium of about \$890,000, he said. But the premium will decrease to about \$630,000 without the football program. Last year, 31 percent of the district's insurance claims were football related, he said.

Likewise, the total cost to the district of maintaining and updating football stadiums over the next five years was projected to be as much as \$25 million, according to Hasson.

"The state stopped funding us in 2015, and we just don't have the money for these programs," he said.

The lack of state support also played a role in Pima's decision.

“It’s expensive,” said Edgar Soto, acting Desert Vista campus vice president and director of student affairs at Pima. “It costs half a million dollars to run the basics at a community college football program. Our decision wasn’t because of a viable conference, or because of future risk, it was because financially there are challenges.”

Pima recently cut 15 staff jobs and 23 faculty positions. Soto said the college couldn’t justify paying for a football program while it copes with that level of financial strain. It’s also difficult to measure the return on investment from football.

“You’re not filling up stadiums, you don’t have endorsements from big-time companies,” he said. “But what we have to look at is not just the return on financial investment, but the return on social investment. Team building, leadership, being a part of a team -- with athletics you do have a unique skill.”

But you can’t run a football program on a “shoestring budget,” Soto said. Colleges can’t buy cheaper helmets or cheaper pads, he said, because there are too many safety risks and the priority should be protecting the health of student athletes.

National Impact

The NJCAA's membership includes 400 community college basketball programs, compared to 73 football programs.

“Four or five schools possibly drop football, and it certainly impacts other school programs,” said Christopher Parker, the association's executive director. “We respect and understand all the decisions the State of Arizona and the Maricopa system have to make. But we’re also true advocates for those students who are only attending school because football is the driving force to get them to attend.”

While two-year college football programs exist across the country, Parker said the strongest ones are in Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi and Texas. And the number of programs nationwide has remained steady for the past decade.

Starting football at a community college costs about \$100,000 on average. But eliminating it could be even more costly, according to Parker.

“Schools look at the football programs as enrollment generators,” Parker said. “We’re talking 100 to 200 students attending these schools to play football ... Many of our two-year football student athletes graduate and earn significant four-year scholarships to continue their athletic careers at four-year schools.”

For example, Carolina Panthers quarterback Cam Newton and Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers are both former NJCAA student athletes and examples of football players who used community college as a launching pad for their NFL careers.

However, the enrollment effect of cutting football at Maricopa isn't the same as it would be at Eastern Arizona. Maricopa, which enrolls about 200,000 students across 10 colleges, this year enrolled 318 football players on four teams. Eastern Arizona, with roughly 6,300 students, enrolls 77 football players.

Haynie said if all the football players decided to leave the college because the program was cut, it would mean losing about 3 percent of total full-time enrollment.

“On one hand it’s not a lot in the grand scheme of things,” he said. “But our enrollment declined 7 percent from last year. So, another 3 percent on top of that would be significant, and I don’t know

what next year's enrollment will be like.”

Eastern Arizona also will take into consideration its marching band and sports medicine program when it examines whether to cut football. The marching band is the only one at an Arizona community college. And Eastern Arizona's sports medicine program allows students to receive on-and off-the-field training with football players.

“Would we continue marching band?” Haynie said. “I don't know.”

Students in the sports medicine program get a great experience on the football field, he said. But the college features seven other sports that allow those students to get the experience they need. The college has other bands that would continue as well, such as jazz and symphonic ensembles. But Haynie said cutting football and possibly the marching band could affect recruitment.

“Every college or university is trying to define ourselves as unique, and we're the only community college marching band in the state,” Haynie said. “We've claimed that title for a long time, and if we have to drop that, it would be a blow for us.”

Officials at Arizona Western said they will be evaluating whether the football program can survive in a smaller conference after the team's bowl game this weekend.

NJCAA is monitoring the situation and is in discussions with Arizona colleges that have not eliminated their football programs to figure out whether the conference can remain feasible.

“It's a difficult situation right now,” Parker, the NJCAA executive director, said. “We'll have to work with different conferences on evaluating their needs and helping to facilitate more games for them to play and to fill a schedule. It'll take some creative and out-of-the-box thinking.”

Community Colleges ^[4]

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Links:

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/06/15/arizona-community-college-cuts-football>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/03/12/arizona-unprecedented-defunding-community-colleges>

[3] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/27/arizona-community-colleges-cope-state-disinvestment-and-declining-enrollments>

[4] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/community_colleges