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EDUCATION

UMass football thrown for big losses

Called 'UMess' by ESPN, program missing targets

JACK SULLIVAN Dec 12, 2019

WHEN THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS opted to enter major college football in 2012, officials pitched the idea that the program would pay for itself over time, even bolstering non-revenue sports at the school through national television appearances, bowl

invitations, and sold-out games at home with brand-name teams visiting on glorious fall weekends in New England.

Eight years into the move, the results are not promising. The school is a laughingstock on the field with a 19-77 record since entering the Football Bowl Subdivision in 2012. UMass is mocked as "UMess" – the second-worst team in the country in ESPN's weekly "Bottom 10" rankings. The program is also bleeding red ink, with expenses outpacing revenues by at least $40 million since the switch to the Football Bowl Subdivision with the difference largely being made up by funds from the school's general budget, student fees, and the state's taxpayers.

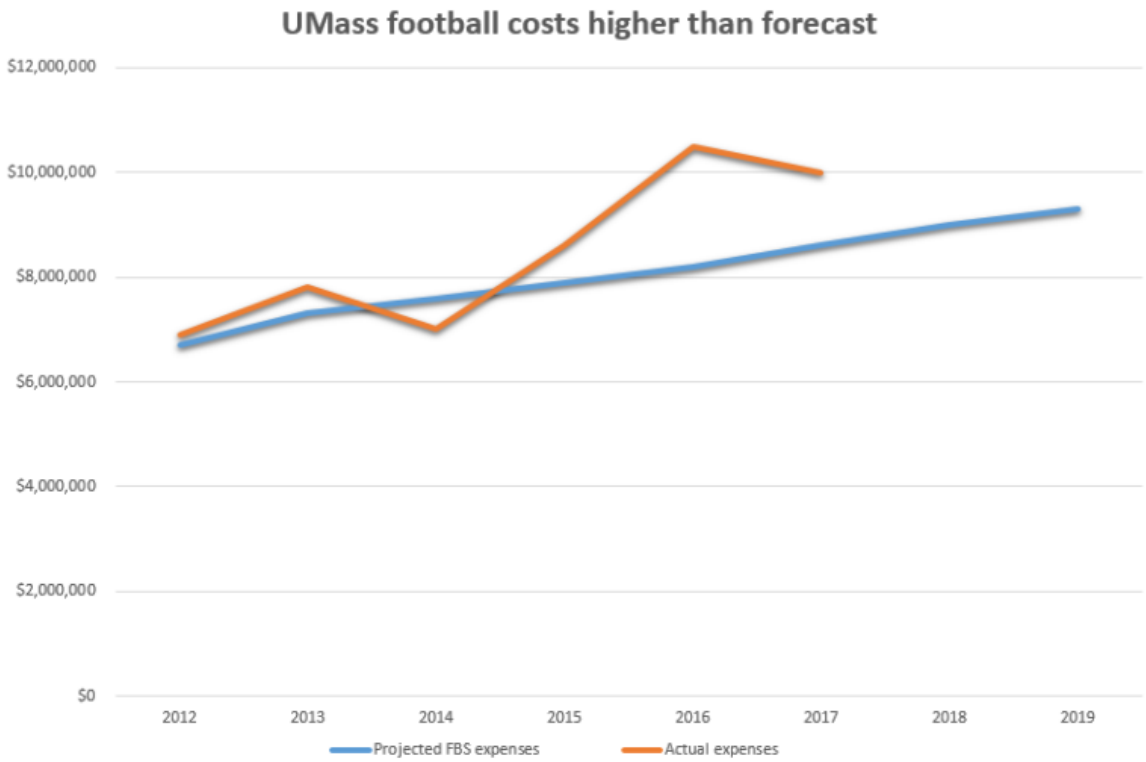
"They're obviously weak," says Woody Eckard, a professor of economics at the University of Colorado Denver Business School who has studied and written extensively about the economics of college sports and, specifically, football. "They're down at the bottom and you're wondering how long they're going to be able to survive."

Indeed, as negative numbers continue to be posted on annual budget reports, school and state officials will soon have to take a hard look at whether the cost of letting student-athletes don the Minuteman uniform in the top level of college football is worth the price.

In 2011, as athletic department officials lobbied trustees and faculty to approve the move to big-time college football, they laid out an eight-year "Pro Forma Summary" through the end of the 2019 football season, which came last month. The summary predicted hefty revenue increases that would greatly reduce the dependency on student fees and cash infusions from the administration and the state. In hindsight, the numbers were wildly optimistic, bordering on fantasy.

In its initial report on the football program's finances, an ad hoc committee of the UMass Faculty Senate reported that the budget grew by $2.8 million in two years, far beyond the projections, and has continued to increase since. In addition, the committee found that the program relied on state and university support for 83 percent of its budget, as opposed to the 64 percent projected in the pro forma.

According to annual data filed with the NCAA for fiscal 2018, the most recent year available covering the 2017 season, the program had expenses of just over $10 million and revenues of $3.1 million, leaving a deficit of $6.9 million, including debt service and other non-operating expenses. A surplus of $323,000 had been projected in the original pro forma.



In fiscal year 2011, the UMass athletic department laid out budget projections for the first eight years of Football Bowl Subdivision competition, the highest level in college. The chart compares those projections to actual expenses. (Note: The expenses do not include other costs such as annual payments of more than $2.5 million for debt service on the reconstructed McGuirk Alumni Stadium.).

Since UMass left the lower-tier Football Championship Subdivision, where the school enjoyed some on-field success, including a national championship in 1998 and an appearance in the championship game in 2006, the cost of the program has more than doubled, from $4.8 million in 2011, the last year of FCS play, to $10 million in 2018.

Ryan Bamford, the UMass athletic director who took over in 2015, concedes the “pro forma” was exaggerated but said, “I inherited it.” He said the decrease in reliance on student fees and university support has been modest but steady, declining from $4.9 million in 2011 to $4.25 million last year.

"We're spending less on football as an institution," says Bamford. "That's a good thing. That's sort of the trend line. There's a lot that's changed in the last eight or nine years. My whole goal is reducing the financial impact football has on this institution and the drain it has on the institution."

Revenues are rising largely because the school is receiving higher appearance guarantees from larger, more established programs such as Notre Dame, University of Florida, Tennessee, and Northwestern. Big football programs often pay schools like UMass to play them to extend their schedule and pad their record. For instance, Bamford says, Auburn University, which recently defeated perennial powerhouse Alabama to knock them out of playoff contention, will pay UMass $1.9 million next year to come to Alabama to play.

"That alone is obviously good publicity for us, a good revenue stream to invest into the program," he says.

Though Bamford admits the program's impact on drawing students and other benefits cannot be quantified, he said a study shows appearances against more established programs shines a bright light on the school that can be measured. He pointed to a game against Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, in 2015 that was nationally televised on NBC. Still, it was Notre Dame's lowest-rated broadcast of that season and one of the lowest they've had in the last 10 years.

Bamford said for UMass, the game had a measurable marketing impact of more than $12 million, equal to the entire run of the school's national championship team in hockey last year in the Frozen Four. In addition to the exposure to a national audience, networks run free ads featuring the participating schools during broadcasts, spots that would normally cost millions if bought by a private advertiser.

"That's not insignificant," says Bamford, adding Notre Dame has invited UMass to return at an unspecified date.

While he acknowledges he has no direct data to show a beneficial impact by the football program on the university, he points to the fact that UMass has risen in *U.S. News & World Report*'s higher education rankings from 56th to 24th among public research

universities as an indication the move has not been a drag on the school's academic side.

Bamford also points out the increase in scholarships for female athletes because of Title IX mandates as a result of the increase in the number of football scholarships from 63 to 85 by moving to FBS. Athletic student aid for football players in 2018 was $3.7 million plus an additional $1.1 million in scholarships to women athletes to even out the imbalance.

Bamford's financial numbers for UMass don't include non-operating expenses. For example, the school spent $36.8 million renovating McGuirk Alumni Stadium, an improvement mandated by the switch to FBS to meet minimum seating capacities and upgraded press boxes for television broadcasts. Nearly all of the debt service, more than $2.5 million a year through 2043, is being paid out of the school's budget and is not reflected in the reported data.

The stadium upgrades and higher competition, though, have done little to increase attendance at the 17,000-seat stadium. In attendance, UMass ranked next to last out of the 129 FBS programs around the country, ahead of only Ball State. The team averaged only 10,385 paid attendees per game, with the stadium often being only half-filled. The total year's attendance of 62,312 was lower than the average single-game attendance of 21 of the top FBS programs. Even playing all of its games at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough in 2012 and 2013 and several a year after that did little to boost attendance, with crowds of less than 15,000 in the cavernous facility.

Because of weak sales, Bamford said the school has had to buy tickets every other year and distribute them to nonprofits in the region to meet an NCAA mandate of a minimum 15,000 average attendance for games biannually to qualify for FBS play.

The lagging attendance has been a major reason the program has generated deficits. While initial projections when officials touted the move promised millions in annual ticket revenues, the actual figures have been a fraction of that. The pro forma counted on ticket sales starting in 2012 at $1.7 million and rising to $2.7 million by 2019. Final numbers are

not available yet for the 2018 and 2019 seasons but in 2017, total ticket sales were just $452,000, down from $568,000 the year before. UMass paid out $2.1 million in appearance guarantees over those two years to teams coming to play.

Eckard, the University of Colorado sports economist, says a major part of UMass's dilemma is playing as an independent without an affiliation with any college athletic conference, a key to television appearances, bowl invites, and recruiting. Absent that, he said, survival for any football program is unlikely with the exception of big independent football schools such as Notre Dame, Brigham Young, and Army.

Bamford said UMass is in negotiations with some unnamed bowl representatives that could offer the school potential bowl invitations as an independent program between 2020 and 2025, though he says he can't announce anything yet. UMass would also have to improve dramatically on the field as most bowls have a minimum eligibility requirement of at least six wins in a season and higher for independents.

"We can exist as an independent," he says. "It's not a death knell by any stretch."

David Hoagland, a professor of polymer sciences at UMass and a member of the Faculty Senate, said he hasn't been to a football game despite emails from the administration imploring faculty to show support for the team.

"I'm not much of a football fan," he says.

But Hoagland, who has been teaching at UMass since 1985, says he's somewhat troubled by the outflow of resources as the school faces tightening budgets and reduced support from Beacon Hill.

"These are enormous sums of money," says Hoagland. "I'm not sure what we're getting in return for large sums."

Hoagland, who as a member of the Senate's Rules Committee recently asked an athletic department official to offer tangible results of what impact the football program has had on benefits to the school, said he was unable to get a concrete answer.

"He told me he wasn't sure," Hoagland says. "He said there's certainly an effect, they just don't how big it is."

Many faculty members who were on the Faculty Senate at the time of the switch have either retired or moved on from the university. Others declined to comment. Max Page, a professor of art and architecture now on leave from the school and serving as vice president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, declined comment. He was much more vocal in 2011, when he suggested eliminating football completely because of the cost.

"Professional college athletics is a hungry and jealous beast," he said at a Faculty Senate meeting on December 1, 2011, focused on the move to FBS. "It demands to be fed and petted and scratched; it expects fealty; it grasps its power and spitefully behaves badly, knowing it has become too big to be put down. It only grows and grows."

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