

Faculty Senate Opposes Proposed Diversion of University Funds for WSU Athletics

Summary: On behalf of the WSU Faculty Senate and our faculty constituents, we appeal to the Board of Regents to reject the plan to use University funds to subsidize the Athletics Department (for paying Pac-12 membership dues or any other costs), starting in fiscal year 2022. Diversion of these funds will significantly hinder WSU's ability to perform our core mission as a land grant institution in education, research, and outreach. The faculty are alarmed that the request will divert \$2-3M of University funds annually to subsidize a University entity that is neither essential to the core mission nor self-sustaining. We question the fairness of this plan. The Athletics Department currently has an accumulated debt of \$120M and continues to lose approximately \$10M per year as revenues fall far short of expenses, yet academic departments across the WSU system have made painful sacrifices to balance their budgets. The timing of this proposal is especially egregious as WSU struggles to finance our core mission due to the economic fallout of the global pandemic. Guiding principles of our institution include shared governance and transparency; thus, the Faculty Senate need to be part of the solution moving forward. In this spirit, the Faculty Senate presents this document to address the key problems with the administration's proposal with the intention of helping the Athletics Department attain their goals in a financially sustainable manner.

Recommendations:

- 1) We respectfully ask the WSU Board of Regents to reject the administration's proposal to divert \$2-3M annually from University funds to the Athletics Department.
- 2) We respectfully ask the Board of Regents to require the administration and Athletics Department to justify any future plans to use University funds for athletics with objective, verifiable data.

Inequality in Budget Cuts: Academic units across the WSU system have already enacted budget cuts of 10% or more, while the Athletics Department has been allowed to accumulate approximately \$10M of debt annually (even prior to the pandemic), which has now accumulated to \$120M. The effects of these budget cuts to academic departments across WSU are large and painful. They have significantly decreased faculty's ability to perform our core mission. For example, critical staff have been cut such as lab managers, postdoctoral fellows, office assistants, and graduate research / teaching assistants. In addition, course instructors, extension agents, and faculty positions have been cut. Many WSU employees work and teach in buildings that have a significant backlog of deferred maintenance. These cuts not only increase the student-to-faculty ratio in classes, but also reduce our ability to obtain external research funding and provide valuable extension to Washington's industries. The cuts have negatively impacted our ability to address President Schulz's signature "Drive to 25" goal. The proposed investment in the Athletics Department instead of our core mission could result in WSU lagging behind our peer institutions and could hamper our ability to support world-class teaching and research, as well as outreach to the citizens of Washington.

Questioning the Assumptions Underpinning the Administration's Proposal: There are no data to support the assumption that intercollegiate athletics plays a crucial role in student enrollment and retention to graduation in the WSU system. On Dec. 10, President Schulz stated that there are no internal data to back their assumptions, and we know of no current effort to collect the appropriate data to test this claim. It is unwise and unethical to conduct cost-benefit analyses in a "data-free" zone. On the other hand, *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019*, from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, provides evidence that factors such as "this college has a very good academic reputation" and "the academic reputation of my intended major" are the #1 and #2 reasons that students choose to attend a public university. "This college has a good reputation in social and extracurricular activities" is reason #6, behind other factors as noted and additional ones such as availability of financial aid and the cost of education. In fact, the totality of the evidence from studies published in the higher education literature does not support broad assumptions about benefits to enrollment and retention from Intercollegiate Athletics.

Costs to WSU Productivity: In the FY2021 Athletics Budget Update and a Plan for Fiscal Recovery, VP Pearson and AD Chun acknowledge that diverting money from the University will negatively impact normal operations: "The investment of institutional support will reduce financial flexibility should state support or tuition levels continue downward in FY2022." This downward trend is highly likely given the pandemic; thus, the proposal to divert University funds to support activities outside of our core mission is not only misguided, but it comes at an especially inappropriate time. Based on overwhelming feedback from colleagues across the WSU system on the Faculty Senate Blog, we are concerned that the proposed diversion of funds will negatively impact employee morale and the infrastructure faculty rely upon to acquire large grants. There is also a substantial risk of a "brain drain" from WSU if faculty begin to search for jobs elsewhere. We respectfully ask the Board of Regents to consider working with the administration and Faculty Senate to develop a plan to use the \$2-3M to address other pressing issues, such as closing significant gender- and ethnicity-based pay gaps at WSU, investing in faculty recruitment and retention, and improving research facilities. Furthermore, faculty have expressed on the Faculty Senate Blog that they are morally opposed to University resources contributing to serious long-term injuries and even brain damage (chronic traumatic encephalopathy or CTE) in the student athletes we are entrusted to educate.

Prospects for a Self-sustaining Athletics Department: The faculty do not see how the proposed plan moves WSU Athletics forward in a sustainable manner. The Faculty Senate believe that there are serious, larger questions to address, including: How will WSU spend down the Athletics Department's cumulative debt of \$120M? As a rural, land grant university, can the WSU system afford the luxury of an Athletics Department that is not self-sustaining? Given the economic headwinds that WSU is facing due to the pandemic, answers to these questions need to be addressed so that WSU can support our core mission of education, research and outreach. The Faculty Senate is committed to working together with the Administration and the Athletics Department to resolve these important issues that will shape the future of our institution.