

Forgive the Debt? An Historical Analysis of Athletic Department Debt Relief

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Abstract

In 2017, the University of New Mexico Board of Regents moved to approve a seemingly benign measure. The school's main campus would "forgive" or "retire" (both terms were used throughout the discussion) the nearly \$5.6million debt owed it from UNM's Athletic Department. This was, basically, the canceling of a paper debt. It was a fractional part of the university's \$3+ billion annual budget. No actual money would change hands.

But then the student newspaper found out. And a media firestorm erupted. Eventually, after protests from the faculty senate and other groups, the issue was tabled.

Every year, American universities and colleges rack up new athletic department debts. Relatedly, or so it seems, every year these same institutions cut teams from their athletic portfolios. Most recently it's the University of Arizona that seems to have boarded the debt-and-cuts roller coaster. Between 1988 and 2023, NCAA schools dropped more than 5,500 teams. Budgetary pressures almost always figured prominently into these equations, although as Andrew Zimbalist and others have pointed out, figuring out exactly what athletics cost a university, and what debt is particularly harmful, remains a somewhat quixotic task.

Some cut programs disappear without much notice. In other cases, however, significant public outcry results from a program's discontinuation. When the University of Wisconsin, for example, axed its baseball team in 1991 after competing in the sport for 116 years, protests erupted on campus.

While Title IX has often factored into these decisions, this study will demonstrate that as often as not, Title IX has been blamed for athletic department problems and budgetary issues that have little to do with gender equity. Instead, a long history, exists of blaming Title IX for cuts that stemmed from other issues. Accordingly, a skewed paradigm of female athletic opportunity at the cost of the same for males has become widely accepted.

In 2020, quietly, UNM's Board of Regents forgave much of the Athletic Department's debt that had originally been in question. But this was after the school had already cut 4 Division I teams from its portfolio. So we're left to ask: What if the school had just forgiven the debt earlier?

Beyond this one example, this study provides an historical analysis of the forgiveness of athletic department debt. When has it happened? Why? To what end? Providing answers to these questions is vital to understanding how and why schools make the decisions that they do when they find themselves in a "debt crisis."