SPORTS AT WHAT COST?

Athletics, Academics, and the UNC System

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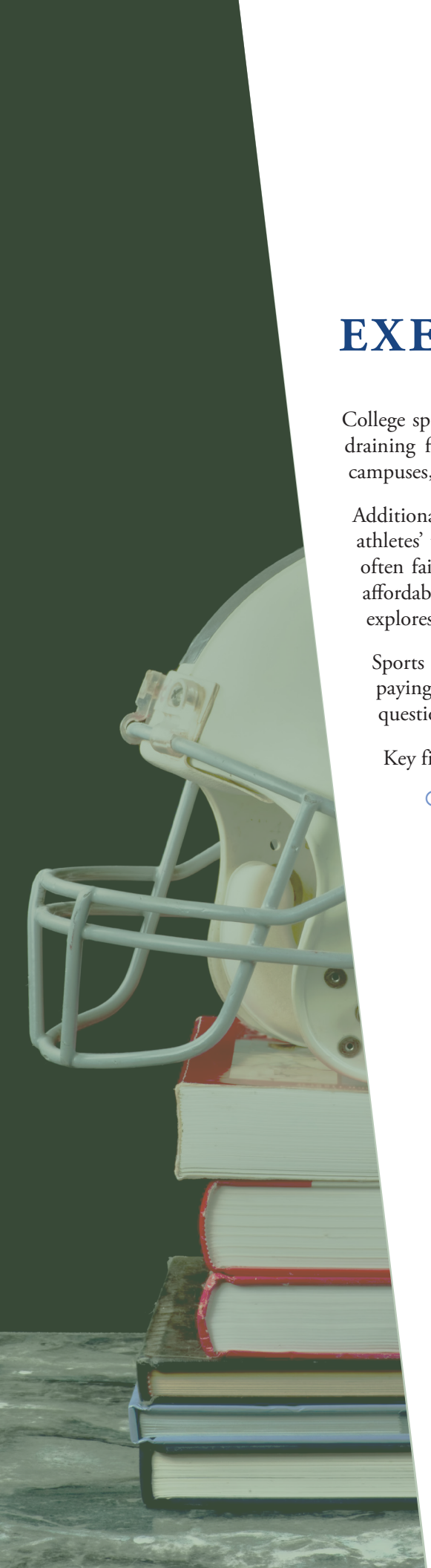
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

College sports aren't all fun and games. They come at a real cost to students and taxpayers, draining financial resources and undermining the collegiate atmosphere. At many UNC campuses, athletics departments rely heavily on student fees and institutional support.

Additionally, highly competitive, demanding athletic commitments consume hours of athletes' time and energy, leaving little room for academics. Division I institutions try, but often fail, to reconcile two opposing goals: win big games and provide students with an affordable, exceptional education. By reviewing financial and academic data, this report explores why schools often cannot have both.

Sports come at a cost, yes, but how much exactly are North Carolinians and students paying for athletics? How do these costs vary by campus? This report analyzes those questions, urging policymakers and university leaders to confront them.

Key findings include:

- Many athletics departments are heavily subsidized by their universities and the government.
- At most UNC System institutions, students shoulder a heavy financial burden for athletics through mandatory fees.
- At least five universities treat nonresident student-athletes as resident students, which gives them access to more taxpayer dollars.
- Top college sports teams offer staggering coach salaries and commit to sizable buyouts in their contracts.
- Despite the resources poured into athletics, student-athletes graduate at dismal rates.

INTRODUCTION

It is a new era in college athletics. The Trump administration describes the current college sports environment as "an out-of-control financial arms race… that is driving universities into debt, threatening to siphon resources from other sports, and damaging student-athletes' educational and graduation opportunities."

College football is the main protagonist in this arms race, with men's basketball following close behind. At least 30 states have passed laws that allow athletes to profit from their name, image, and likeness (NIL), and one state, Arkansas, exempts some NIL earnings from state income tax. North Carolina has even contemplated passing a law that would grant student-athletes tax deductions and taxpayer-funded grants (including tax credits for businesses that support NIL), all while establishing a bureaucracy to manage NIL payments. The bill has stalled, but is indicative of escalation in the college sports arms race.

The interstate competition for student-athletes is further fueled by new rules governing compensation and pay-for-play. The 2025 landmark settlement in *House v. NCAA* enabled each school to pay its athletes up to $20.5 million, rising annually. Now that athletes can transfer between institutions multiple times without penalty, universities are under pressure to write the biggest checks to secure star players.

The winners in this playing field are clear: the successful athletes along with the coaches and athletic departments behind them.

Ordinary North Carolina students and taxpayers, however, are not as fortunate. College athletics often relies heavily on revenue from student fees, as well as more direct forms of institutional support. The state even allows out-of-state student-athletes to be treated as in-state students for tuition purposes—with North Carolinians footing the bill.

The highly competitive atmosphere has furthermore warped college sports and detracted from universities' core academic missions. If a student is enrolled in a university, their studies—not the most glowing NIL deal—should be their first priority. Universities are responsible for ensuring academic standards align with that priority.

North Carolinians, parents, and students deserve to know how athletics are impacting their budgets and the academic integrity of their institutions. This report analyzes athletic information and financial data from each of the 15 UNC System institutions to provide transparency, raise awareness, and spur much-needed reform.

METHODOLOGY

The athletics financial data for each of the 15 UNC System institutions comes from the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database (2024), the U.S. Department of Education's Equity in Athletics Data Analysis (EADA), the NCAA, and the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. The UNC System and its constituent institutions are another data source. Figures 3, 4, and 6 use the UNC System's FY 2024–25 Intercollegiate Athletics & Financial Transparency Report (FY2025). The campus profiles use Knight-Newhouse data for FY2024, so their totals differ from those in the figures. Per-student subsidies divide student fees plus institutional and government support by IPEDS 12-month FTE enrollment for 2024–25, which includes graduate students.

THE FINANCIAL COSTS OF INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS IN THE UNC SYSTEM

Student Fees

Student fees are a significant source of athletics revenue at most UNC schools. The athletic fee is separate from the student activities fee. The student activities fee funds recreational facilities, such as the campus gym.

According to 2024 data, UNC Asheville has the largest athletic student fee at $906 per student. UNC Wilmington's student fee ($820) generates over 60 percent of the institution's athletics revenue, while NCA&T's student fee ($870) accounts for 57 percent of its athletics revenue. Other institutions with high athletic fees include Elizabeth City State ($899), North Carolina Central ($862), Fayetteville State ($858), UNC Charlotte ($844), UNC Greensboro ($843), UNC Pembroke ($819), Western Carolina ($817), Appalachian State ($816), Winston-Salem State ($780), and East Carolina ($773).

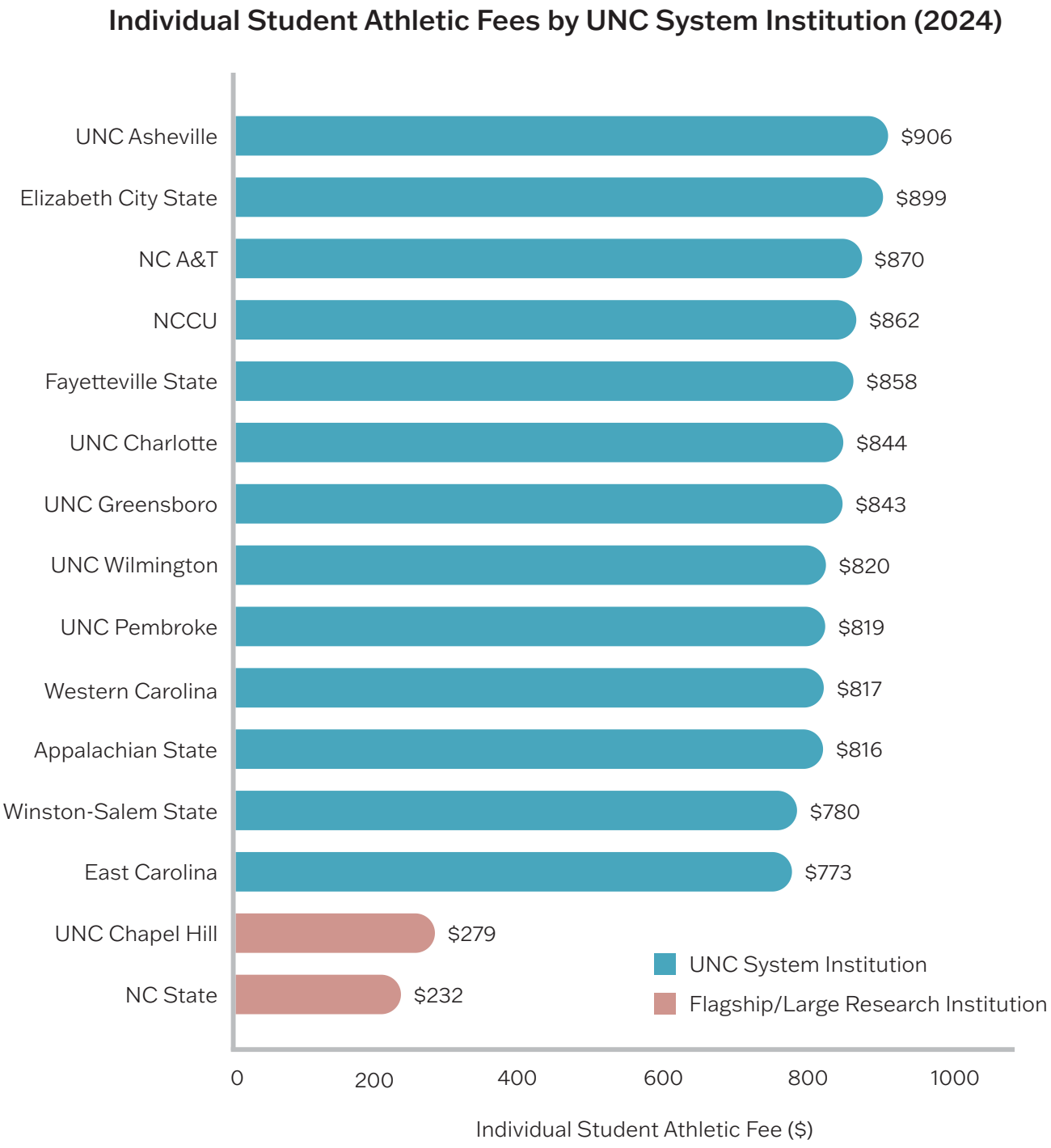


Figure 1. Source: UNC System

In many cases, this financial burden on students is a steep increase from 2014. Elizabeth City State's student fee increased by 44 percent, from $624 to $899. Fayetteville State's increased by 39 percent, and UNC Wilmington's and UNC Pembroke's each by 25 percent.

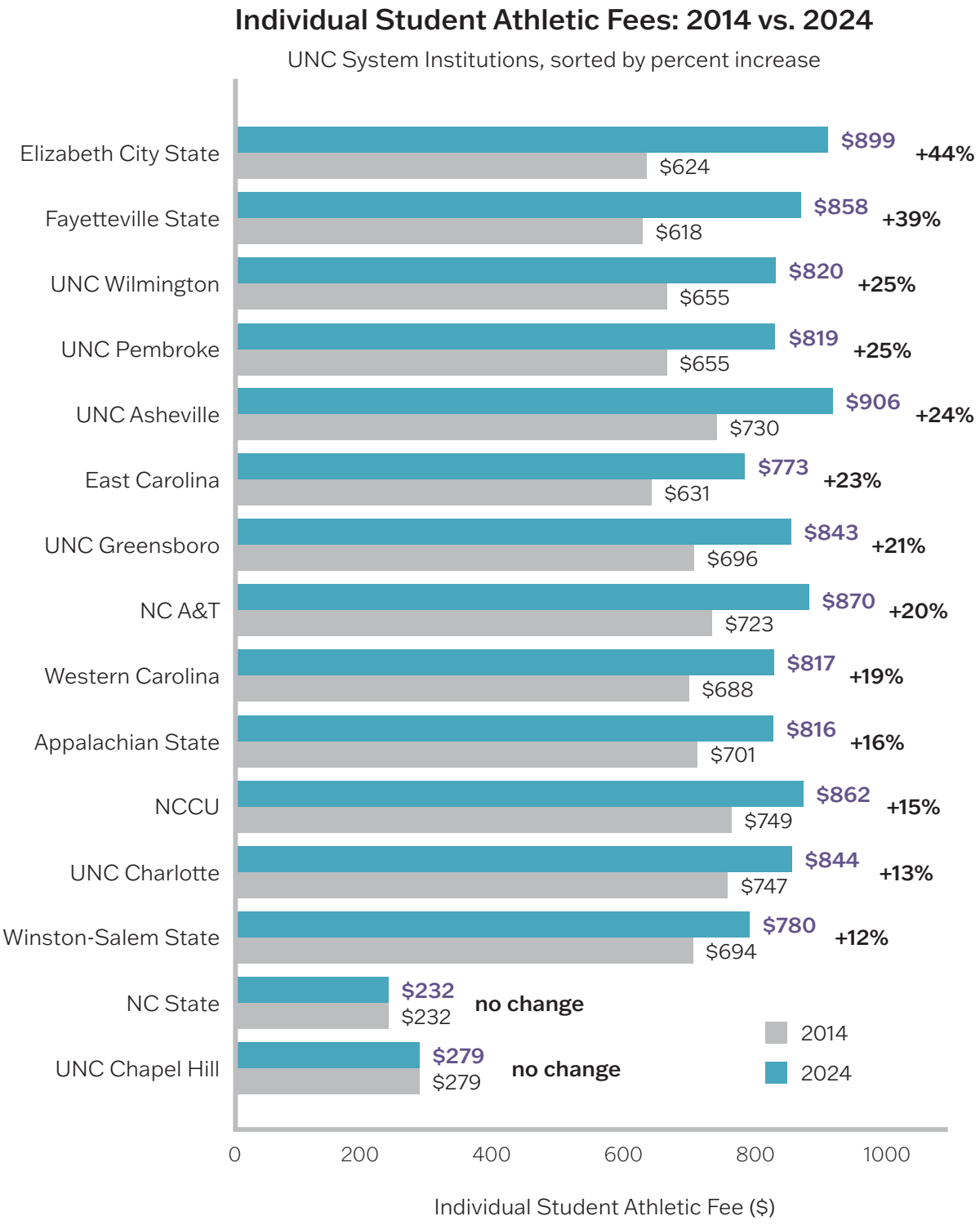


Figure 2. Source: UNC System

Revenue and Expenditures

Most institutions' athletics departments avoid being in the red, although spending and revenue are often neck and neck. UNC-Chapel Hill is the exception. In 2025, its athletics department brought in $173 million but spent $188 million, a $15 million shortfall covered from athletics reserves.

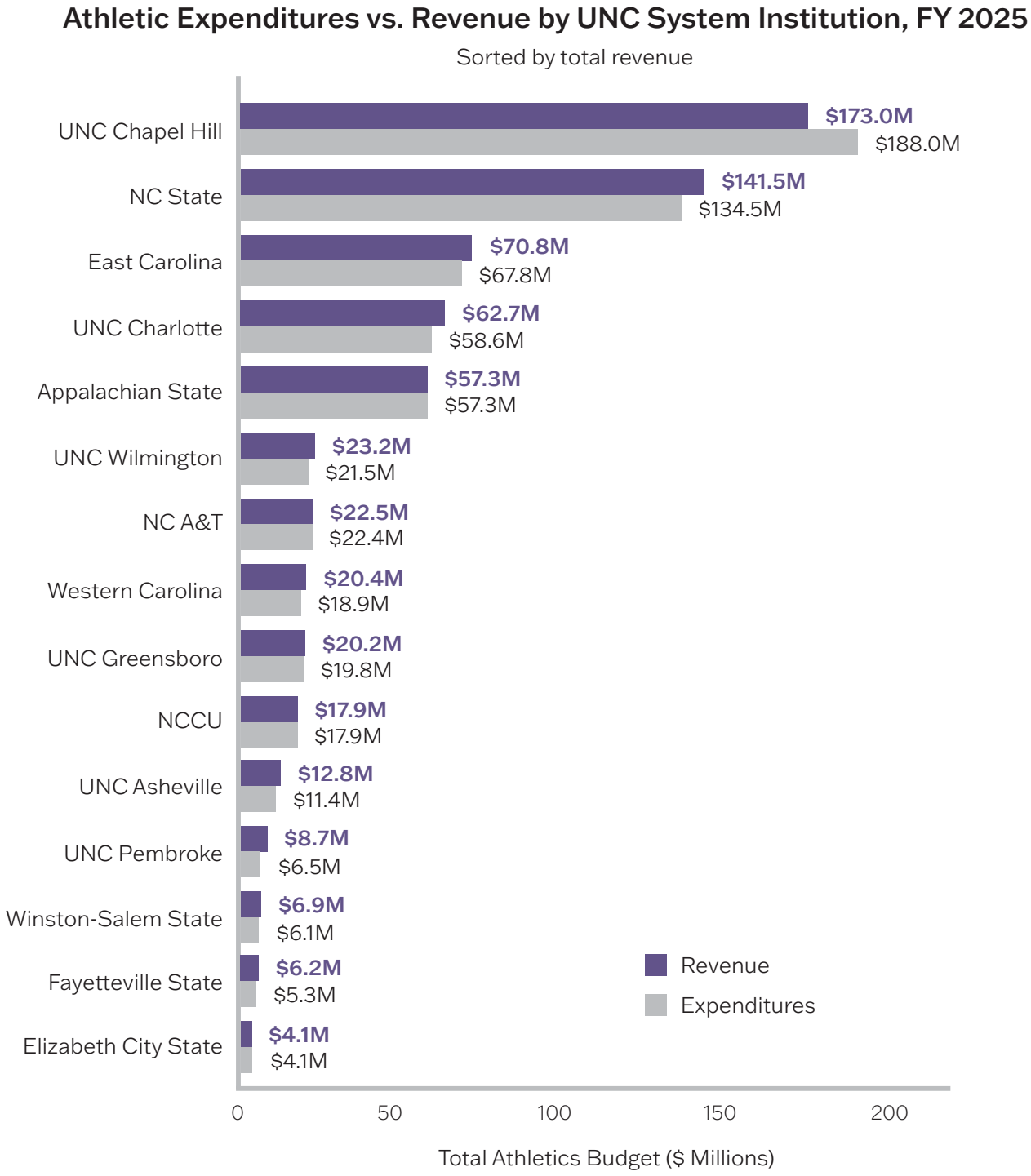


Figure 3. Source: UNC System, FY 2024-25 Intercollegiate Athletics & Financial Transparency Report, Appendix B (May 2026).

At several institutions, athletics significantly rely on institutional and government funds.[1] Elizabeth City State University is the most egregious example, with over half of its revenue coming from this combined support. North Carolina Central University is not far behind, with about 50 percent of its total revenue coming from institutional and government support. This doesn't include revenue from student fees, which further increases monetary support.

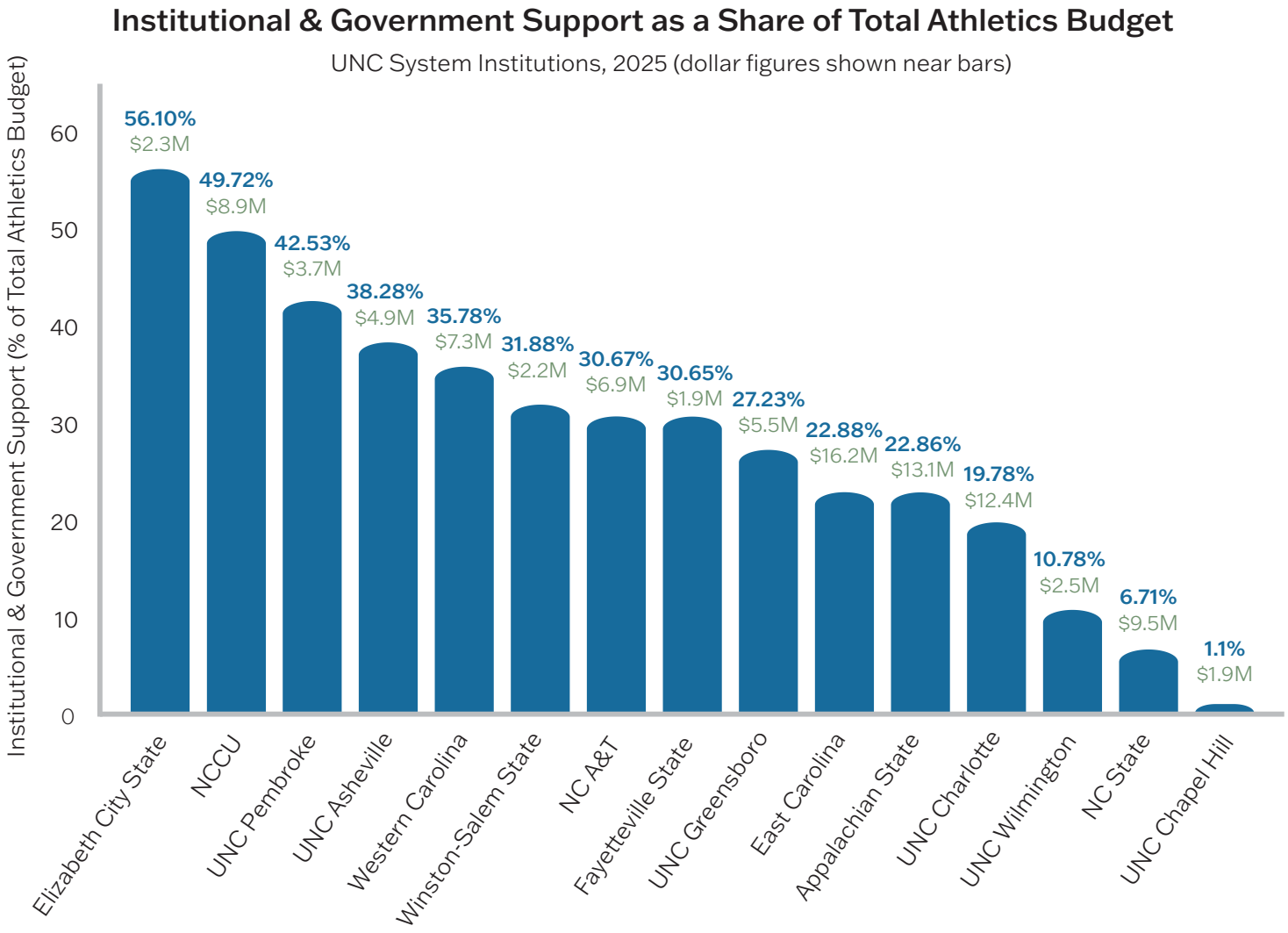


Figure 4. Source: UNC System

When factoring in student fees, Elizabeth City State's athletic department is only 8 percent financially self-sufficient. Fayetteville State and North Carolina Central's self-sufficiency are only at 11 and 20 percent, respectively.

1 "Institutional/Government Support" is defined by the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database as: "Revenue received from governments, direct funds from the institution for athletics operations, and costs covered and services provided by the institution to athletics (and for athletics debt) but not charged to athletics." Figure 4 uses the UNC System's FY2025 figures; the campus profiles use Knight-Newhouse's FY2024 figures, so the two can differ.

Coach Salaries

Coaches are paid exorbitant salaries in the UNC System, and these gaudy sums have skyrocketed in the last decade. The average head coach at UNC-Chapel Hill made $443,284 in 2014, which increased to $1,184,648 in 2024. That is the average. Football coach Bill Belichick has an annual salary of $10 million, with the potential to make more by winning games. That number dwarfs Chapel Hill's chancellor Lee Roberts' base salary of $600,000 (not including housing benefits and bonus opportunities). Belichick's contract guarantees his salary for the first three years, until December 2027. If he is fired before then, the university will have to pay him his salary up to that date. NC State's head coaches were paid an average of $558,356 in 2014, increasing to $1,123,916 in 2024. Before he was fired on October 24, 2026, NC State's football coach, Dave Doeren, made about $6 million, not including bonuses. His contract ran through the 2029 season and included a roughly $10 million buyout if fired without cause, which appears to be the case.

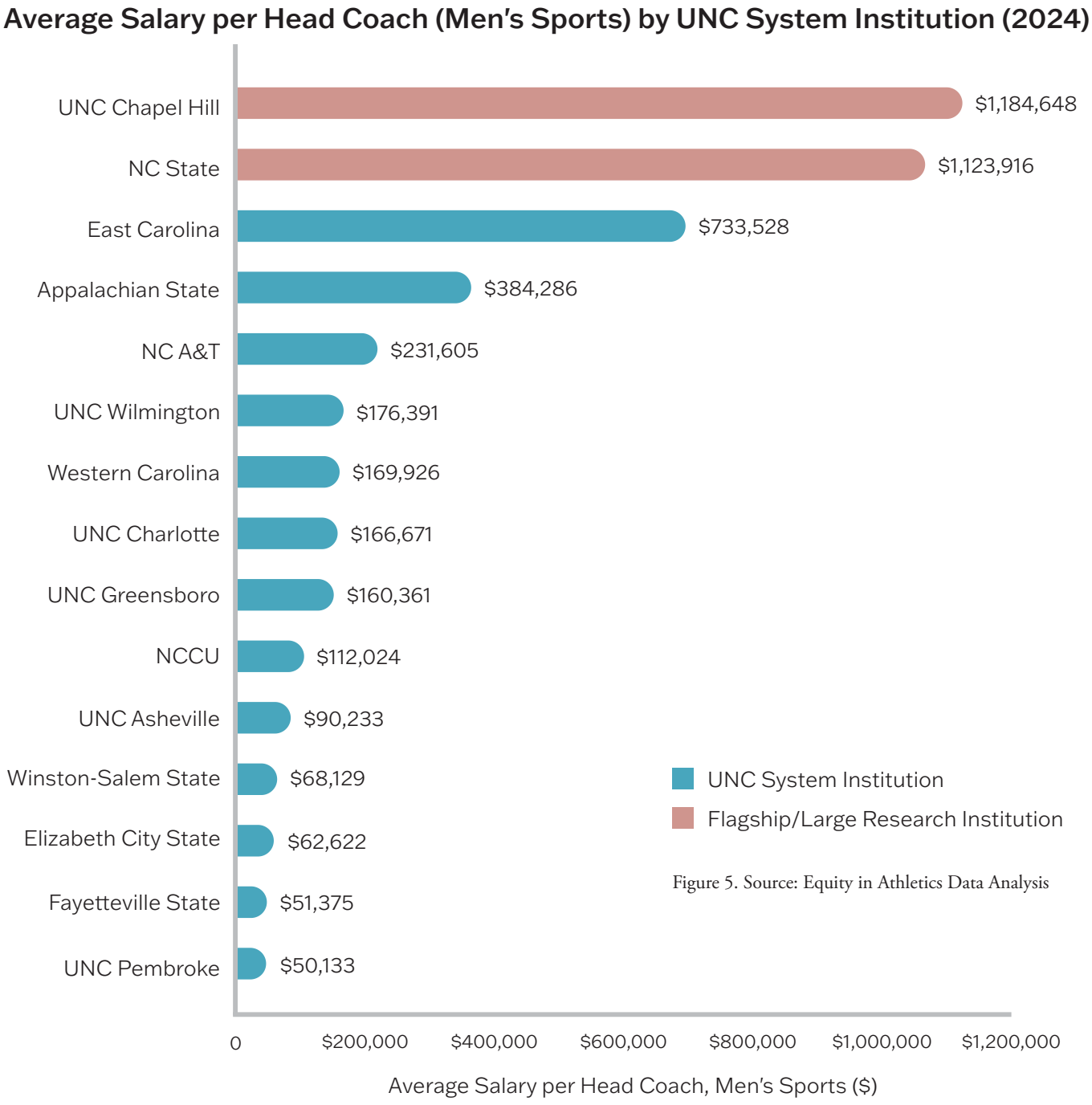


Figure 5. Source: Equity in Athletics Data Analysis

Unjust Financial Burden

At most UNC schools, athletics heavily depend on student subsidies. Regardless of a student's interest in sports, personally funding the athletics department is nonnegotiable. For a student at Elizabeth City State, that amounts to about $3,596 in athletic fees over four years (based on 2024 numbers). This doesn't account for the other university resources that are diverted away from academics to athletics—resources that are supported with students' tuition dollars.

UNC Asheville's students bear the highest financial burden of these schools, with a per-student athletics subsidy of $2,592.85, followed by Elizabeth City State University at $1,820.80 and NC Central at $1,768.61.

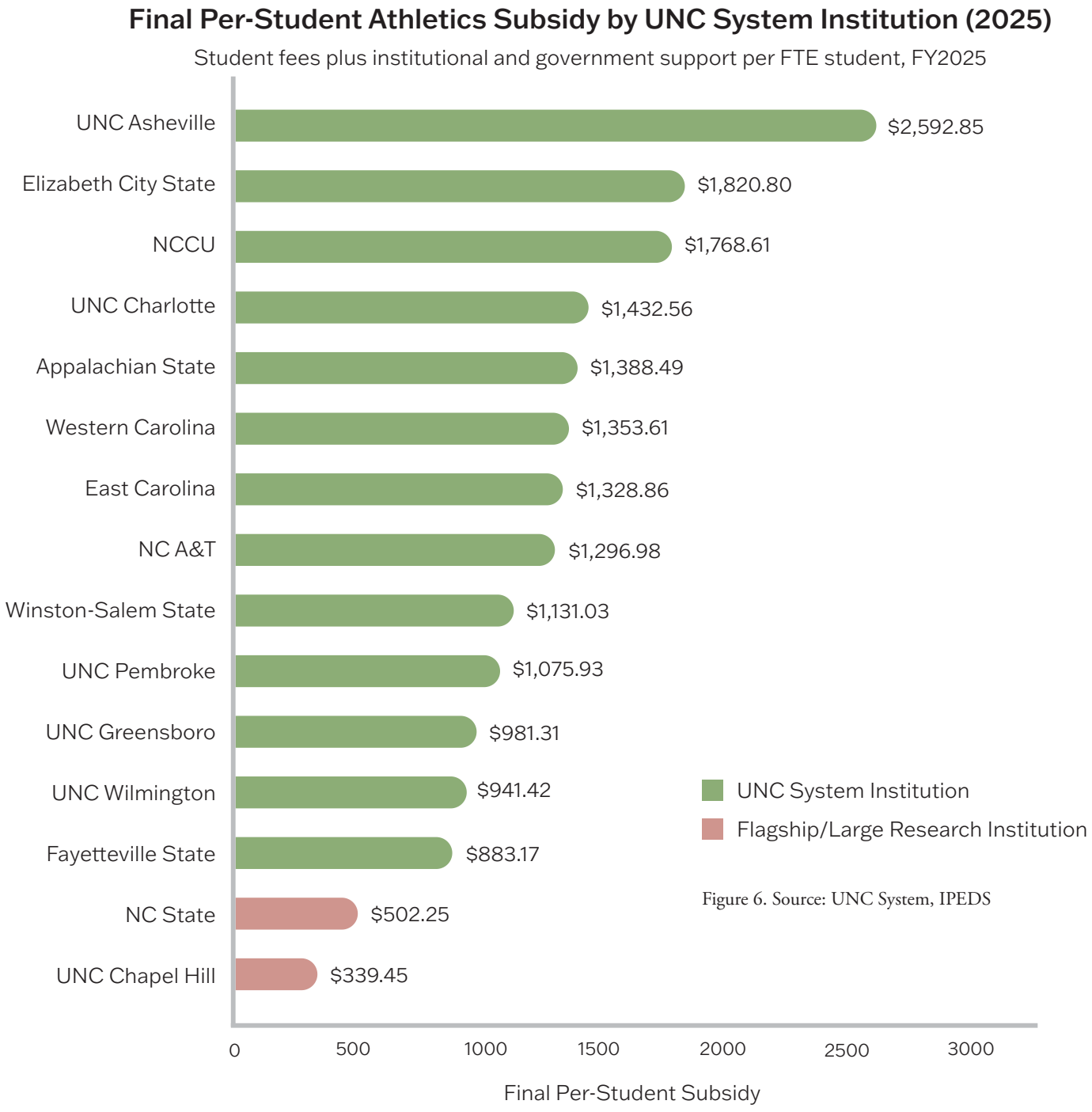


Figure 6. Source: UNC System, IPEDS

These data present an apparent difficulty. UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State students clearly bear the lowest athletics costs. This is because these two schools' competitiveness and reputations generate substantial revenue, minimizing the need for student and institutional support. Indeed, new NIL rules let student-athletes pocket a sizable share of that revenue. But their financial success isn't attributable merely to the athletes' raw talent. That matters, but Chapel Hill and NC State's institutional prestige also carry a lot of weight.

Is the conclusion, then, that the other UNC schools should work to become more competitive? No. Climbing the sports competition ladder is costly, and success is far from guaranteed. Instead, institutions should reduce unnecessary expenses.

Take UNC Asheville, for example. Some of the university's highest athletics expense categories are Facilities, Debt Service, and Equipment (24 percent) and Coaches Compensation (19 percent). These are likely two areas in which Asheville can reduce costs.

Ironically, some of the highest student fees are at the schools where students are least able to pay them. Although students who attend NC Promise institutions, such as Elizabeth City State, pay lower tuition, this doesn't mean they have money to spare for athletics.

Students make a financial sacrifice by going to college, which presents universities with a two-fold responsibility: to make their education as affordable and as meaningful as possible. The key to doing this is to use funds primarily for academic purposes.

North Carolina's citizens also shoulder an excessive amount of athletics expenses. This is evident in the state's law that allows UNC System institutions to treat nonresident students receiving a full scholarship as in-state students "for all purposes." The UNC System subsequently adopted a policy outlining the conditions under which nonresident students may be treated as residents.

Each UNC System institution's Board of Trustees must decide whether to opt in to this policy. They have an incentive to do so: the policy enables them to request more funding from the state. Section 8 of the policy states, "Constituent institutions may include students considered residents pursuant to this section as in-state students in its enrollment funding request." State allocations to the UNC System are closely tied to the number of enrolled in-state students across the schools. When the number of these students is artificially inflated, the state—i.e., North Carolina taxpayers—will likely pay more.

The Martin Center contacted the system's five Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools to see if they take advantage of the nonresident scholarship policy. UNC-Chapel Hill and UNC Charlotte both confirmed with the Martin Center that their boards of trustees have adopted this policy. UNC-Chapel Hill has 426 nonresident student-athletes who are treated as residents, with an estimated state cost of $9.8 million.[2] UNC Charlotte has 245, with an estimated cost of $3 million.

North Carolina State's information is available online, revealing that 133 nonresident athletes are treated as residents—costing the state an estimated $2.7 million. Of those athletes, 57 are football players.

East Carolina University's board of trustees adopted the policy, but it did not respond to the Martin Center's request for the number of athletes benefiting from this policy. Appalachian State University also did not respond to a records request, but a 2022 financial audit report notes that the university saved $1.4 million in athletic scholarship expenses due to "a legislative change that allowed full scholarship athletes to receive in-state tuition." This suggests that Appalachian State implemented the nonresident policy in the 2021-2022 academic year.

Between Chapel Hill, Charlotte, and NC State, this policy costs taxpayers an estimated $15.5 million. This number is likely higher because it does not include estimates from Appalachian State and East Carolina.

2 This is an estimation based on revenues from state appropriations per FTE from IPEDS.

Taxpayers also foot the bill for facilities projects, which consume a large portion of athletics' budgets. UNC Asheville, for example, is making large upgrades to its basketball facilities totaling $5.5 million. The university's assistant athletic director for marketing and communication reported that $5 million of those funds is coming from state funding, i.e., taxpayers. UNC Asheville might have "one of the top facilities in the Big South Conference and in the Region," but should that be one of the university's goals, and is it worth the cost?

THE HUMAN COSTS OF INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS IN THE UNC SYSTEM

The UNC System's schools' deep involvement in competitive athletics clearly places a strain on their budgets, requiring financial support from both students and North Carolinians. More importantly, it undermines their academic integrity by lowering standards and consuming too much of students' time and energy. Finally, the scandal and corruption that sometimes accompany big-time sports risk negatively impacting campus climate.

How competitive athletics undermine academic quality

Student-athletes should be students first, but the incentives and pressures of intercollegiate athletics often make this nearly impossible.

Minimum Admissions Requirements

The UNC System has minimum admission requirements that apply to all incoming students. The System's Minimum Course Requirements (MCR) policy stipulates that students complete certain foundational courses before admission. The Minimum Eligibility Requirements (MER) policy stipulates that to be eligible for admission, applicants must have a minimum GPA of 2.5. Applicants who have a GPA greater than or equal to 2.5 and less than 2.8 must submit a standardized test score of at least 17 on the ACT or 930 on the SAT. These policies exist to ensure that the colleges and universities maintain some semblance of academic standards.

Those standards, however, are sometimes waived for the sake of athletics. UNC policy allows student-athletes who don't meet those minimum standards to be admitted with an exception granted by the institution's chancellor. Of the 1,440 freshman student-athletes across the UNC institutions, 22 (1.5 percent) received an MCR exception, and 13 (0.9 percent) received an MER exception.

For confidentiality purposes, the System does not specify how many athletes at each institution have received admission exceptions. But it does indicate which institutions have granted exceptions. East Carolina, N.C. A&T, NC State, UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC Charlotte, UNC Greensboro, and UNC Pembroke each have at least one Minimum Eligibility Requirements (MER) exception. The MER policy applies to the System as a whole; it does not reflect the standards of individual institutions.

For example, the average GPA and SAT scores of students at UNC-Chapel Hill are much higher than the required minimum standards. In 2025, the middle 50 percent of enrolling first-year students' highest reported scores were 1400-1520 on the SAT and 29-34 on the ACT. Of those who reported their GPA, 98.1 percent of students had a 4.0 or higher. These numbers are significantly higher than the required 2.5 GPA and 930 SAT score. Rampant grade inflation is another factor universities must consider: a 2.5 GPA today does not represent the same level of learning as a 2.5 GPA from 20 years ago. The fact that at least one student-athlete at Chapel Hill couldn't even meet those minimum scores suggests that they will struggle to keep up academically with their peers. Students should be admitted to a given institution based on their ability to succeed in their studies, not on how many championships they win.

Competing Priorities

Travel and training requirements further deemphasize athletes' education. Playing in sports means constant travel to compete, often out of state. International travel now appears to be part of the competition agenda, too. UNC-Chapel Hill's football team recently traveled to compete in Ireland—its first international trip in program history. It is unclear how many classes athletes missed to participate in such long-distance travel, or how many hours the trip diverted from their studies. The 2026 GOALS Study by the NCAA found that the "typical NCAA student-athlete reports being away from campus about 1.5 days per week for in-season athletic competitions."

Committing to athletics also means rigorous weekly training. The NCAA officially caps required training hours at 20 per week, but athletically related obligations often surpass that number—again putting academics on the back burner. The GOALS study shows that Division I athletes spend from 32 to 36 hours per week on athletic activities while in season. DII and DIII athletes report slightly less time spent on athletic training.

It's possible that some student-athletes select a major that can more easily accommodate such a demanding schedule. Many student-athletes across the System major in the following areas of study:

- Business, management, marketing, and related support services (698)
- Health professions (307)
- Communication, journalism and related programs (306)
- Parks, recreation, and leisure and fitness studies (268)

UNC-Chapel Hill has the highest number of athletes majoring in Parks, recreation, and leisure and fitness studies (73), followed by NC State (65).

Chapel Hill's infamous academic scandal involving many athletes is a sobering example of how far some are willing to go to keep players in the game. Over a span of 18 years, students—about half of them athletes—took fake independent study courses through the African and Afro-American Studies department. These "classes" required no attendance or faculty involvement. Students only had to submit one research paper, which was supposedly graded by an administrator. An in-depth investigation revealed that academic advisors purposely directed athletes to these courses to boost their grades (thereby artificially maintaining the minimum required GPA needed for athletic scholarship eligibility).

In a competition, one side always comes out on top. This match between athletics and academics shows how pressures and incentives favoring one side always tip the scale. The pressures and incentives involved with athletics are likely what lead athletes to choose less-demanding majors and cheat their way to glowing grades. When the choice is between lucrative stardom and genuine education, stardom too often takes the trophy.

Consequence: Graduation Rates

When a university prioritizes an applicant's athletic skills over their academic capabilities, poor outcomes should be expected. Graduation rates[3] provide valuable insight into an institution's academic health. Unfortunately, athletes—particularly those in football and basketball—often graduate at much lower rates than their fellow students. In fact, graduation rates for football and basketball players are often lower than those for student-athletes in general. For example, basketball players at NC State graduate at a rate of only 18 percent, while football players graduate at 55 percent, and athletes overall at 68 percent. These numbers are dwarfed by the university's overall graduation rate of 85.5 percent. UNC-Chapel Hill's numbers tell a

3 Graduation rates are 6 year rates, to mirror the NCAA's Federal Graduation Rate, which evaluates first-time students' rate of completion within 6 years. The Graduation Success Rate (GSR) is a different measure that includes transfers, but is not included in this analysis. ECU's men's basketball team has a poor FGR (0 percent), but a much improved GSR (70 percent).

similar story: basketball players have the poorest graduation rate (54 percent), followed by football players (76 percent), and overall athletes (81 percent). Chapel Hill's student body's overall graduation rate is 91.3 percent—a staggering gap in performance between competitive athletes and the average student. This trend holds for a total of six UNC System Division I schools.

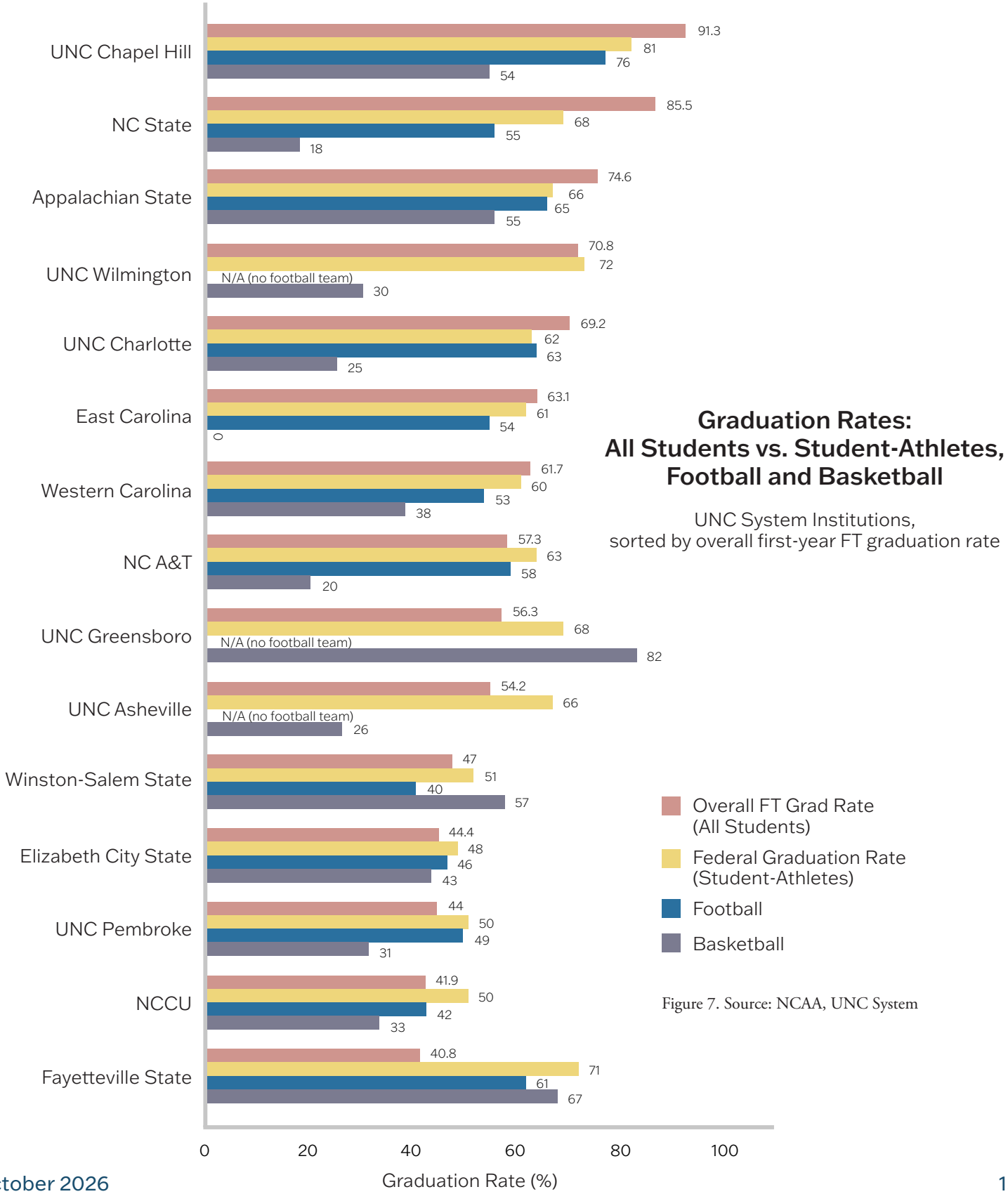


Figure 7. Source: NCAA, UNC System

When the choice is between lucrative stardom and genuine education, stardom too often takes the trophy.

However, five Division I schools and all less competitive Division II schools do not follow this pattern. In a few cases, athletes at these schools graduate at *higher* rates than the overall student body. At North Carolina Central (Division I), basketball players graduate at 33 percent, football players at 42 percent, and overall athletes at 50 percent. Its student body graduates at 41.9 percent. UNC Greensboro (Division I) men's basketball players graduate at a much-improved rate of 82 percent, whereas its overall student body graduates at 56.3 percent. Fayetteville State is an example of a Division II school. There, basketball players graduate at a rate of 67 percent, football players at 61 percent, and overall athletes at 71 percent. The student body graduates at a dismal 40.8 percent. Winston-Salem State is another example, where basketball players graduate at 57 percent, football at 40 percent, overall athletes at 51 percent, and the student body at 47 percent.

Student-athletes should be able to keep up academically with their classmates. The fact that they fail to do so at six Division I schools suggests that high-pressure competitive sports can undermine academics.

How competitive athletics corrupt the campus culture

When fame and fortune are narrowly pursued, unsavory behavior is often part of the equation. Campuses have witnessed this phenomenon play out in their athletics departments.

Gambling

Sports gambling, including wagers on college sports, became legal in North Carolina in 2024. A portion of the gambling revenue generated by the state through taxation and other fees goes to 13 of the UNC System institutions. The original legislation excluded UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State from the distribution of tax revenue, but the recent budget passed in July 2026 will include the two institutions in the distribution starting in 2027. Institutions receive funds based on a tier system.

- Class I institutions are those in which "the majority of its athletic teams compete in Division I of the National Collegiate Athletic Association." Institutions in this category "may receive up to 2.2% annually, or up to $400,000, per school."
- Class II institutions "may receive 19.5% annually, or up to $2.9 million" and primarily compete in Division I or Division II.
- Class III institutions "may receive 5.7% annually, or up to $2.5 million, per public university if the football team competes in the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision."

The new state budget also increases the taxation on sports gambling from 18 percent to 23 percent.

The legality of college sports gambling in North Carolina opens the door to abuse of power by university leaders. The System already mandates that the board members of its constituent institutions avoid any conflicts of interest—or even the appearance of a conflict of interest. This is a general policy, not specifically applied to sports gambling.

UNC Charlotte's board took the extra step to clarify that its members will avoid monetary gain, as individuals, from the performance of athletes from their institution. On August 7, 2024, Charlotte's board of trustees passed a resolution prohibiting board members from "betting or wagering on athletic contests involving UNC Charlotte teams or student-athletes." This resolution affirms the System's commitment to avoiding any conflicts of interest, in this case, those that may arise from board members' involvement with their institution's sports teams. This eases concerns that board members will use their inside knowledge and influence to win wagers.

The remaining UNC institutions should pass a comparable resolution. Doing so is especially urgent in light of some athletes' willingness to participate in "game-fixing," where they purposely underperform to advantage certain gamblers. A former NC A&T University basketball player was one of 26 people charged in a game-fixing scandal—exemplifying the ease with which outcomes can be manipulated. All such activities are already illegal under federal law, NCAA regulations, and university student-athlete codes of conduct, but universities should be proactive and unequivocal in their commitment to govern with integrity.

Alarming Reports

Misuse of authority is potentially at play within UNC-Chapel Hill's football program. The team's general manager, Michael Lombardi, resigned in September after being placed on paid administrative leave amidst an ongoing probe into multiple cases of alleged misconduct involving staff and athletes. Another staff member, defensive coordinator Steve Belichick, resigned in October 2026 after media reports that university investigators were examining allegations of drug use, including whether he provided "drugs to at least one player." UNC officials stated that their investigation found "a disregard for Carolina's values and standards of conduct." The investigation deepens concerns about big-time athletics' negative influence on campus culture.

Other incidents involve football players recklessly driving on campus and violating traffic laws. Some players have received several citations. At UNC-Chapel Hill alone, infractions include:

- Reckless driving (10 counts from October 2024 to November 2025)
- Speeding (A 2025 WRAL investigation found that "nearly 20 percent of UNC's 101-player roster has been cited for speeding since [October 2024]").
- Flagrant disregard of campus parking rules
- Misdemeanor gun charges
- Official investigation of alleged drug use

This is not the behavior of serious college students. More concerning is that UNC-Chapel Hill Football players seem to have suffered only very minor consequences for such behaviors, including fixed game suspensions. In the past 10 years, the Martin Center could find no publicly documented instances of a player being permanently removed from a team or losing a scholarship for bad behavior. As of publication, one current player is under an indefinite suspension. However, in the past, players with such suspensions have been reinstated.

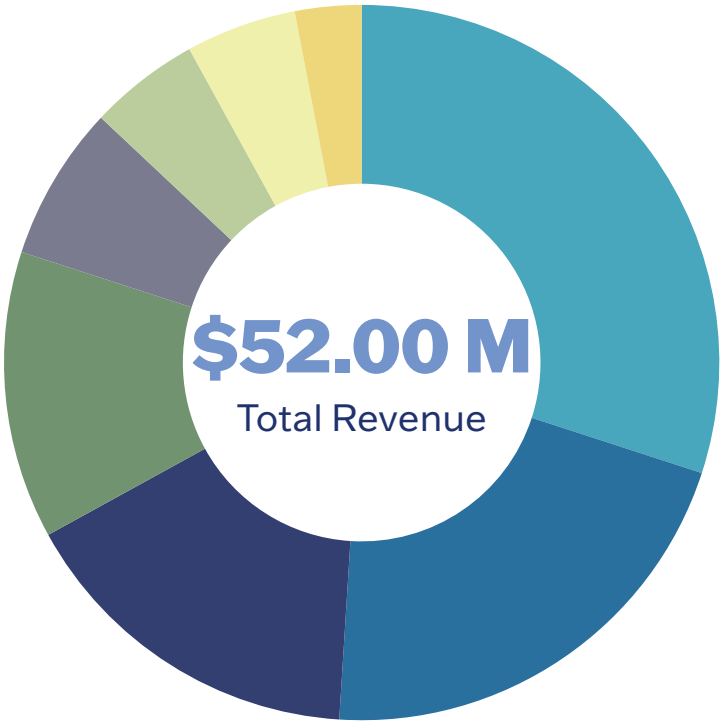
CAMPUS PROFILES

The financial impact of athletics varies across the UNC campuses. Below are individual campus summaries of the System's Division I schools.[4]

4 Revenue and expense data come from the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database, 2024.

APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

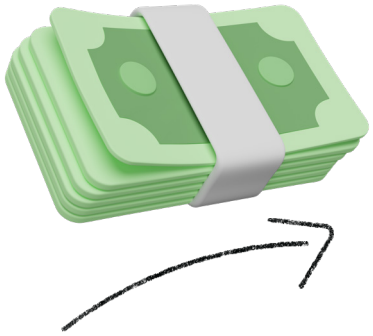
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Student Fees $15.36M (30%)
- Donor Contributions $11.12M (21%)
- Institutional/Government Support $8.31M (16%)
- Ticket Sales $6.99M (13%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $3.82M (7%)
- Other Revenue $2.56M (5%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $2.45M (5%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $1.39M (3%)

Per Student Subsidy

$1,388.49





Highest Coach Salary

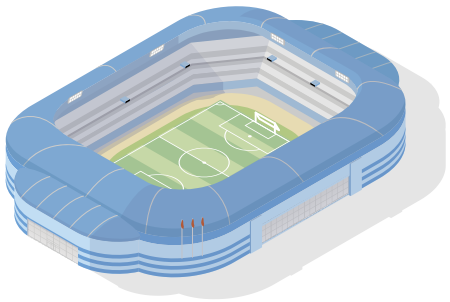
$1 million*

(football coach Dowell Loggains)

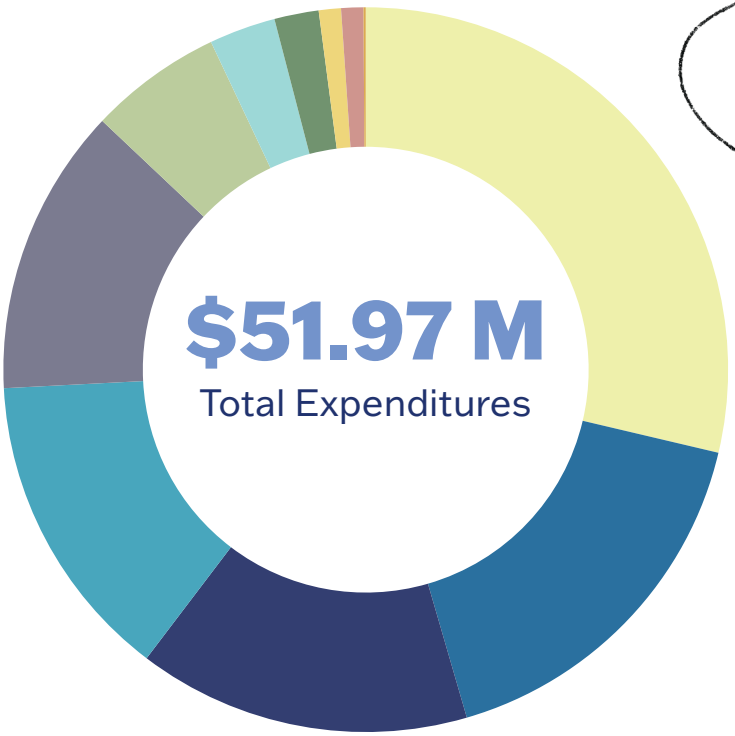
*Base salary only

45.52 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $15.21M (29%)
- Coaches Compensation $8.82M (17%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $7.75M (15%)
- Athletic Student Aid $7.15M (14%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $6.50M (13%)
- Other Expenses $3.17M (6%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $1.42M (3%)
- Recruiting $0.79M (2%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $0.59M (1%)
- Medical $0.50M (1%)
- Coaching Severance $0.07M (0%)

Athlete Graduation Rates



All Athletes

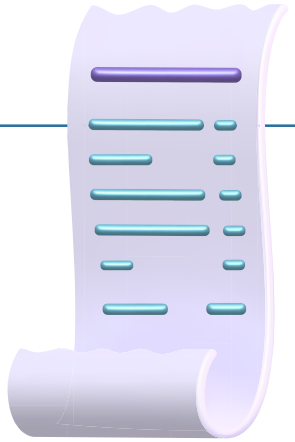
66%

Football

65%

Men's Basketball

55%



$816

Athletic Fee
(per student)

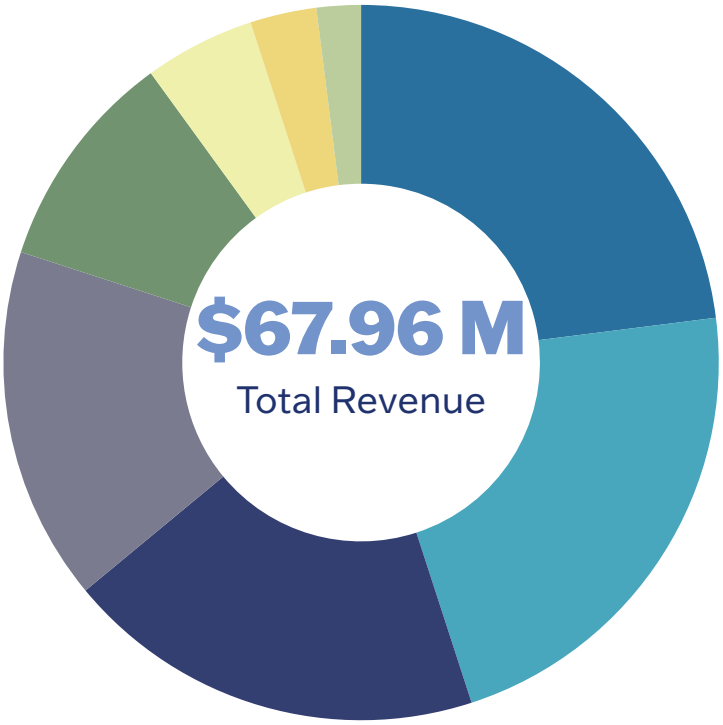
% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

16%

($701 to $816)

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

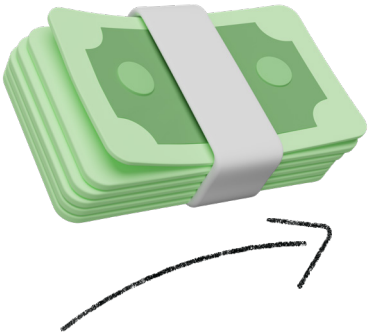
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Donor Contributions $15.91M (23%)
- Student Fees $14.91M (22%)
- Institutional/Government Support $13.23M (19%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $10.68M (16%)
- Ticket Sales $6.52M (10%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $3.32M (5%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $2.04M (3%)
- Other Revenue $1.35M (2%)

Per Student Subsidy

$1,328.86





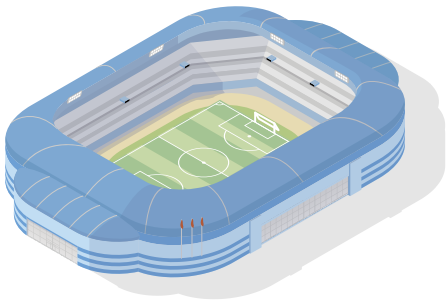
Highest Coach Salary

$1.5 million

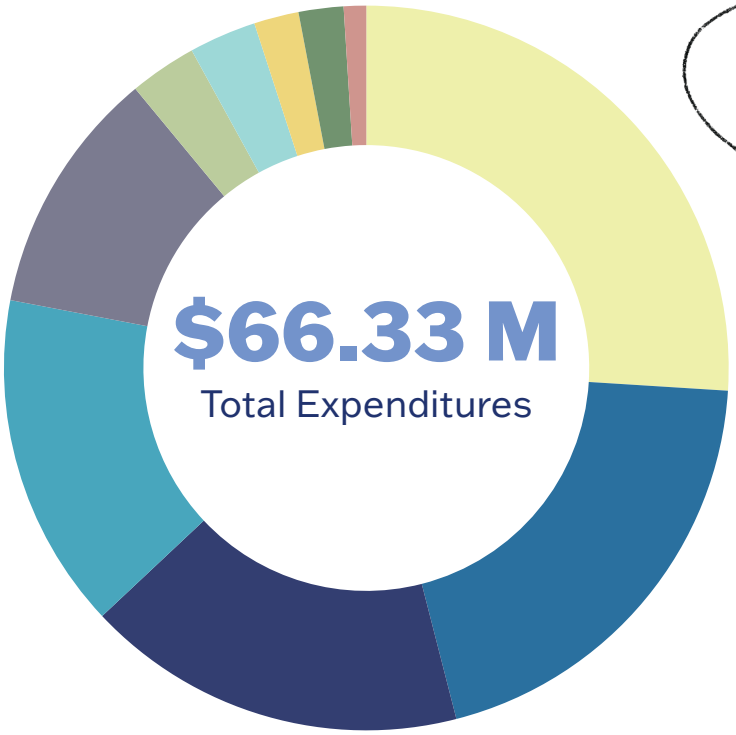
(football coach Blake Harrell)

41.40 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $17.00M (26%)
- Coaches Compensation $13.14M (20%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $11.59M (17%)
- Athletic Student Aid $9.84M (15%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $7.50M (11%)
- Other Expenses $2.03M (3%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $1.94M (3%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $1.42M (2%)
- Recruiting $1.25M (2%)
- Medical $0.62M (1%)

Athlete Graduation Rates



All Athletes

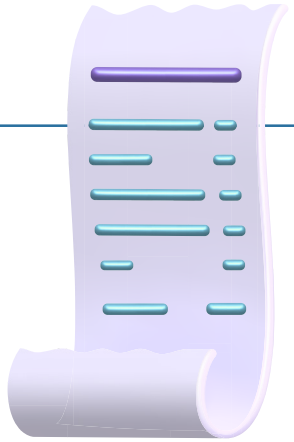
61%

Football

54%

Men's Basketball

0%



$773

Athletic Fee
(per student)

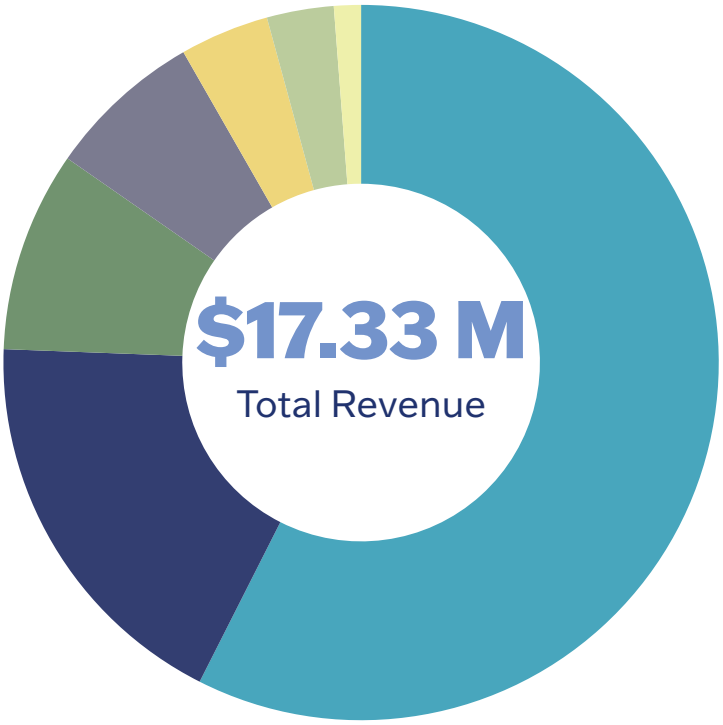
% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

23%

($631 to $773)

NORTH CAROLINA A&T UNIVERSITY

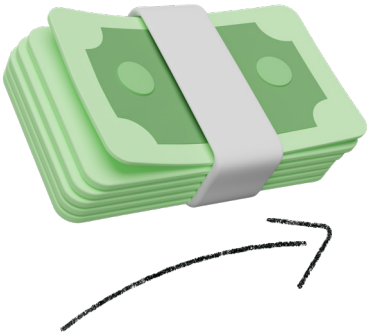
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Student Fees $9.95M (57%)
- Institutional/Government Support $3.17M (18%)
- Ticket Sales $1.54M (9%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $1.21M (7%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $0.75M (4%)
- Other Revenue $0.49M (3%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $0.21M (1%)

Per Student Subsidy

$1,296.98





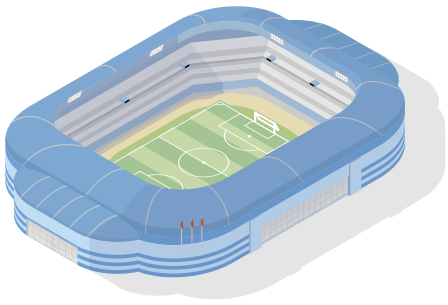
Highest Coach Salary

$384,208

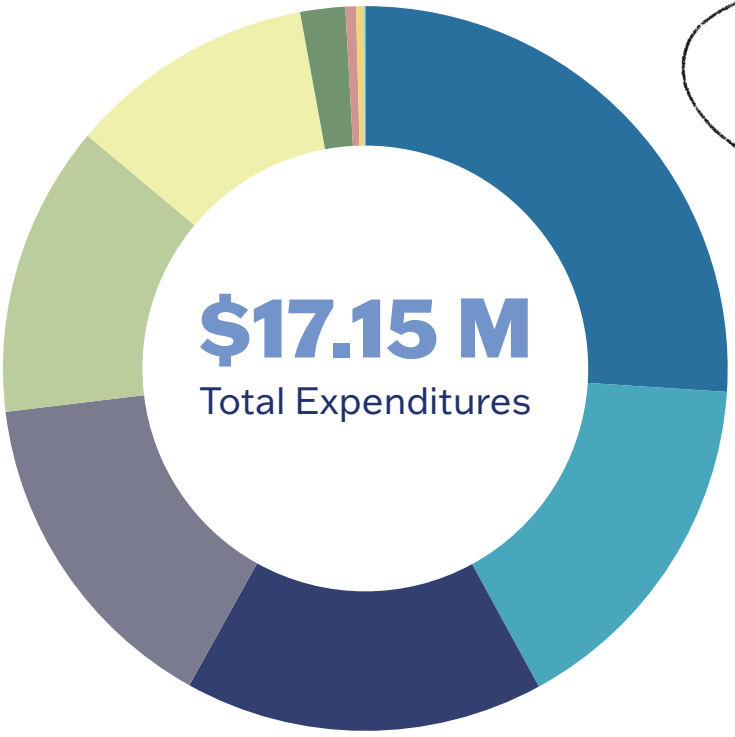
(men's basketball coach Earl "Monté" Ross)
*Base salary only

75.69 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Coaches Compensation $4.42M (26%)
- Athletic Student Aid $2.80M (16%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $2.66M (16%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $2.63M (15%)
- Other Expenses $2.19M (13%)
- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $1.92M (11%)
- Recruiting $0.36M (2%)
- Medical $0.08M (0%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $0.06M (0%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $0.01M (0%)

Athlete Graduation Rates



All Athletes

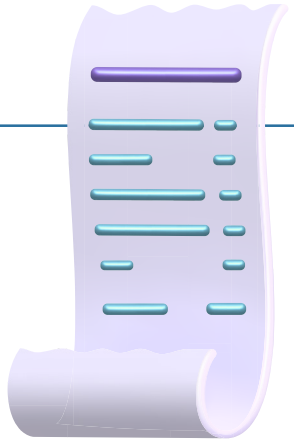
63%

Football

58%

Men's Basketball

20%



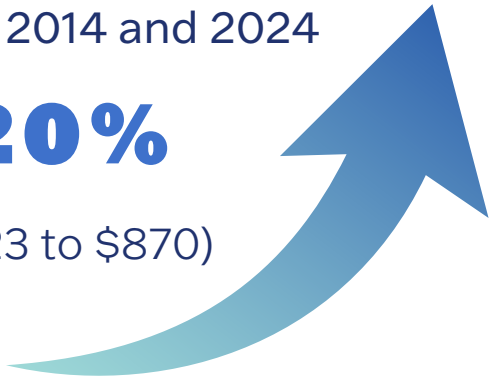
$870

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

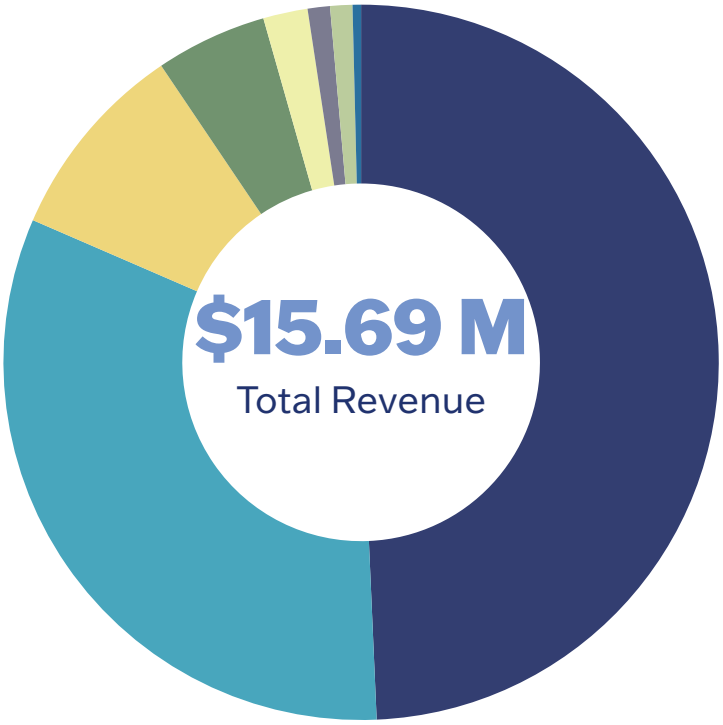
20%

($723 to $870)



NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

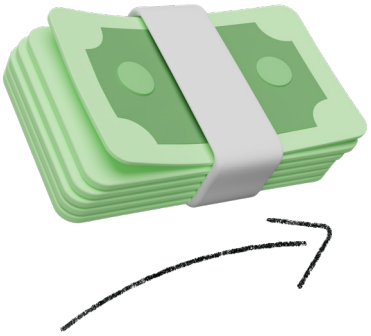
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Institutional/Government Support $7.67M (49%)
- Student Fees $5.06M (32%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $1.46M (9%)
- Ticket Sales $0.75M (5%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $0.28M (2%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $0.23M (1%)
- Other Revenue $0.17M (1%)
- Donor Contributions $0.06M (0%)

Per Student Subsidy

$1,768.61





Highest Coach Salary

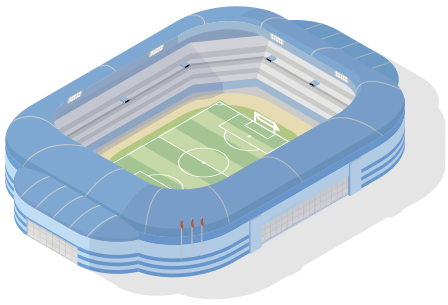
$369,332

(men's basketball coach Levelle Moton)

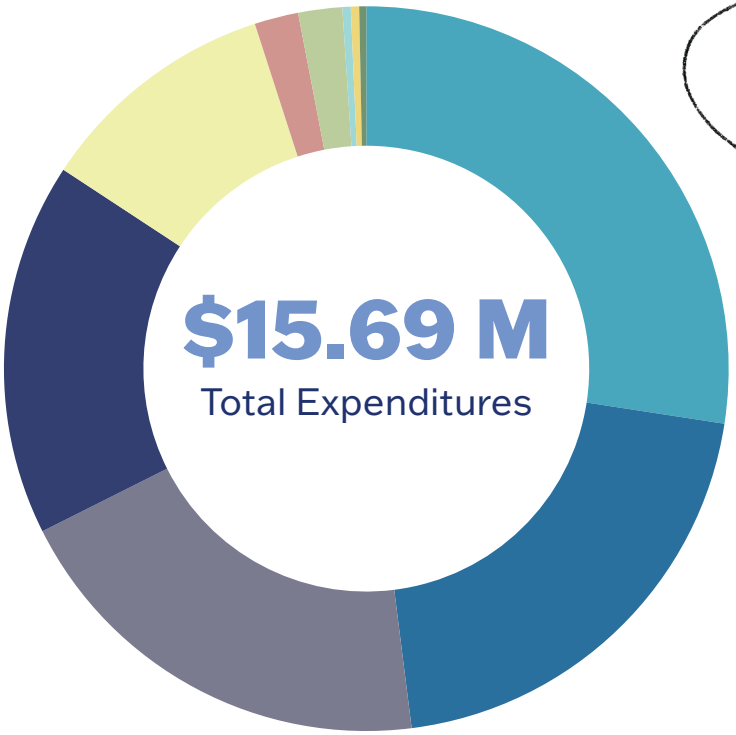
*Base salary only

81.18 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Athletic Student Aid $4.42M (28%)
- Coaches Compensation $3.23M (21%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $3.06M (20%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $2.59M (17%)
- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $1.65M (11%)
- Medical $0.29M (2%)
- Other Expenses $0.27M (2%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $0.06M (0%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $0.06M (0%)
- Recruiting $0.05M (0%)

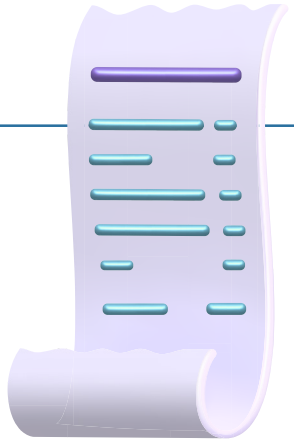
Athlete Graduation Rates



All Athletes
50%

Football
42%

Men's Basketball
33%



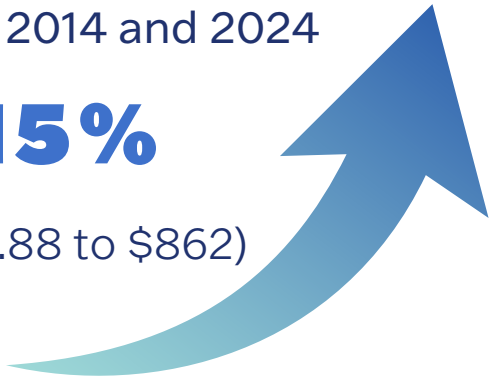
$862

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

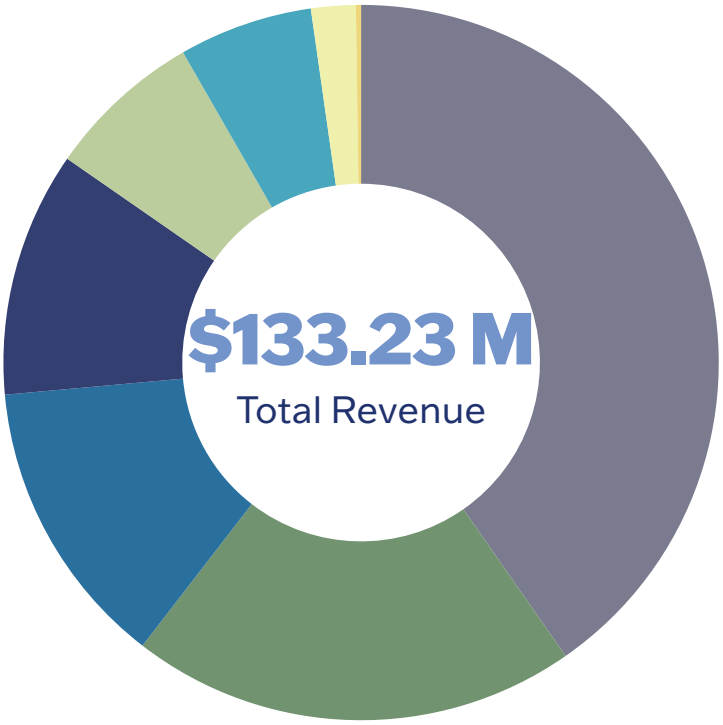
15%

($748.88 to $862)



NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

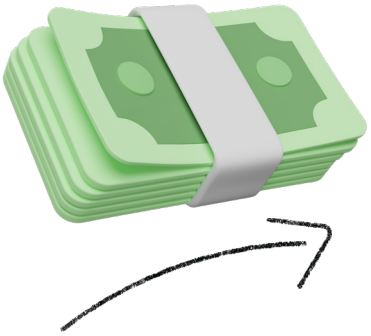
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $55.18M (41%)
- Ticket Sales $26.60M (20%)
- Donor Contributions $17.36M (13%)
- Institutional/Government Support $14.52M (11%)
- Other Revenue $9.35M (7%)
- Student Fees $7.34M (6%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $2.58M (2%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $0.30M (0%)

Per Student Subsidy

$502.25





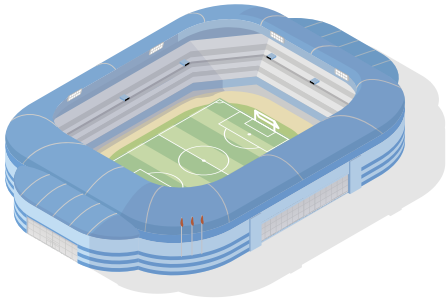
Highest Coach Salary

$5.75 million

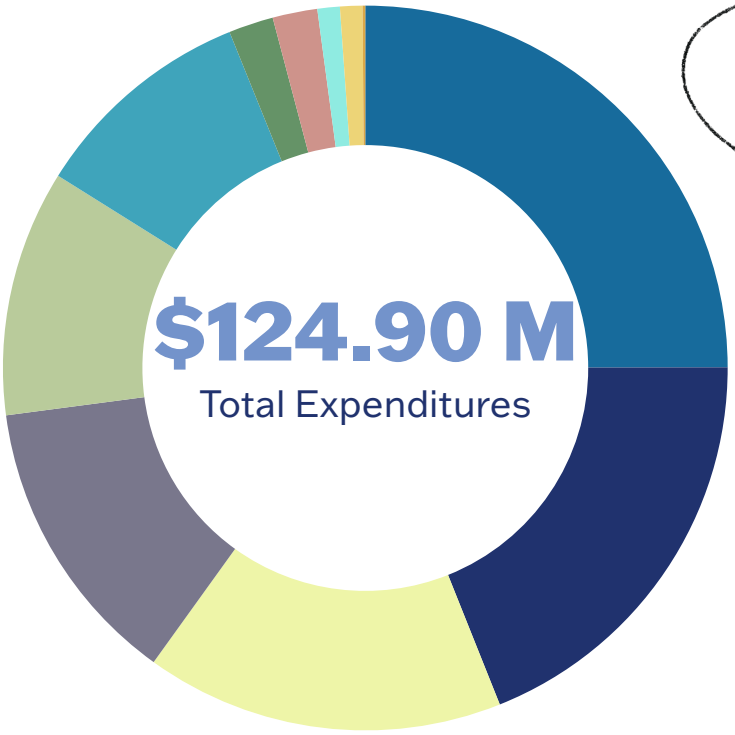
(football coach Dave Doeren)

16.41 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Coaches Compensation $30.79M (25%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $24.22M (19%)
- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $19.52M (16%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $16.58M (13%)
- Other Expenses $14.10M (11%)
- Athletic Student Aid $12.01M (10%)
- Recruiting $2.99M (2%)
- Medical $1.91M (2%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $1.32M (1%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $1.31M (1%)
- Coaching Severance $0.15M (0%)

Athlete Graduation Rates



All Athletes

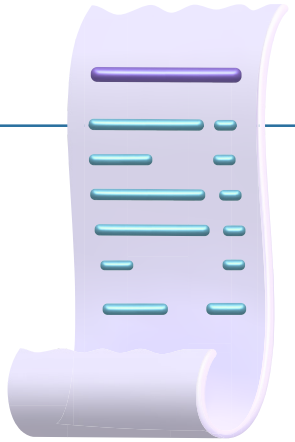
68%

Football

55%

Men's Basketball

18%



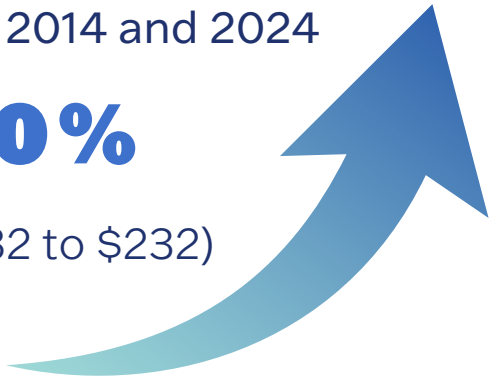
$232

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

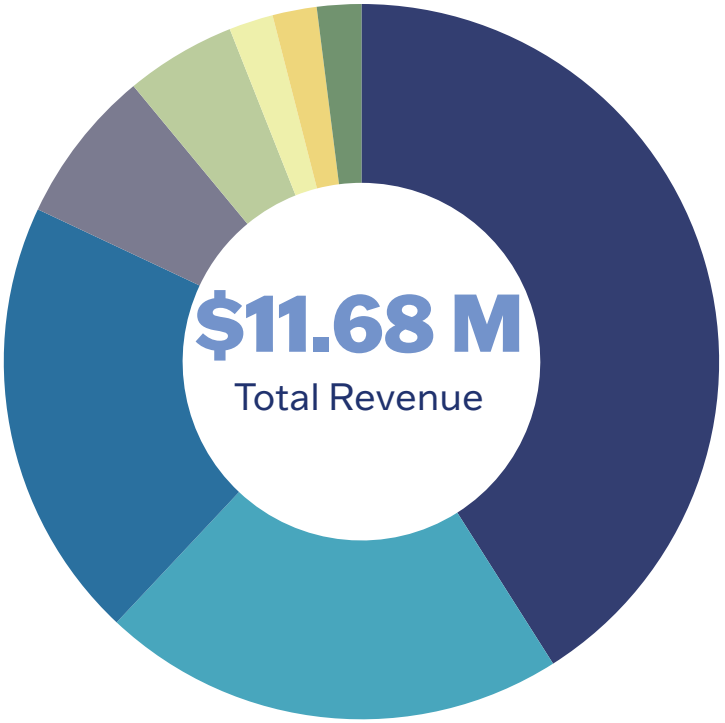
0%

($232 to $232)



UNC ASHEVILLE

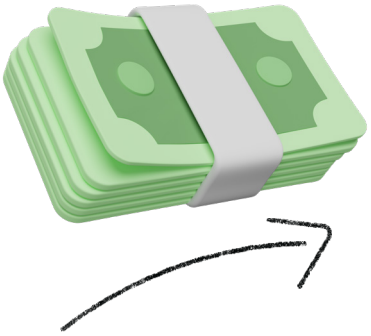
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Institutional/Government Support $4.75M (41%)
- Student Fees $2.40M (21%)
- Donor Contributions $2.33M (20%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $0.84M (7%)
- Other Revenue $0.64M (5%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $0.27M (2%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $0.26M (2%)
- Ticket Sales $0.19M (2%)

Per Student Subsidy

$2,592.85





Highest Coach Salary

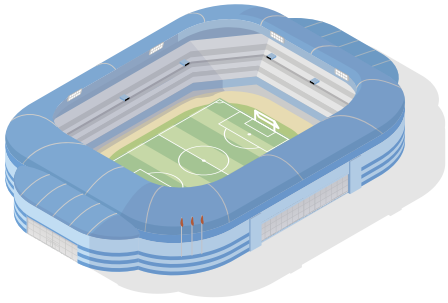
$235,000

(men's basketball coach Michael Morrell)

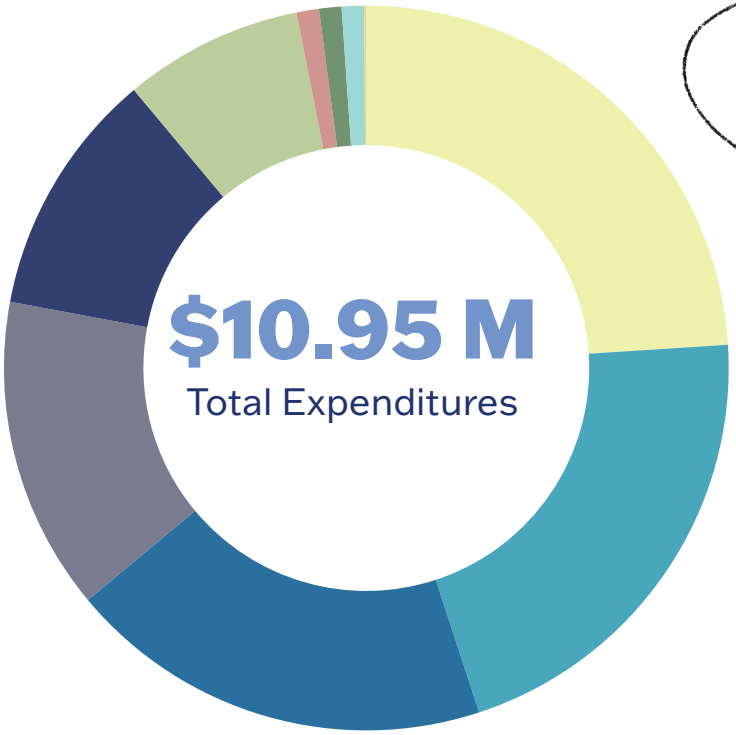
*Base salary only

61.24 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $2.63M (24%)
- Athletic Student Aid $2.26M (21%)
- Coaches Compensation $2.08M (19%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $1.52M (14%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $1.16M (11%)
- Other Expenses $0.92M (8%)
- Medical $0.14M (1%)
- Recruiting $0.12M (1%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $0.11M (1%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $0.01M (0%)

Athlete Graduation Rates



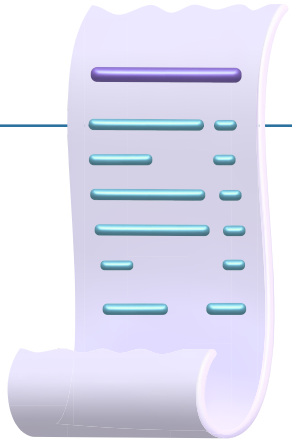
All Athletes

66%

No Football Team

Men's Basketball

26%



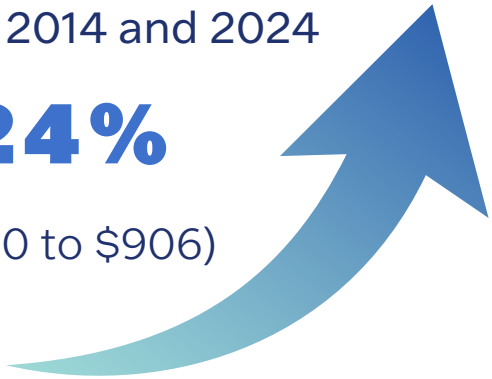
$906

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

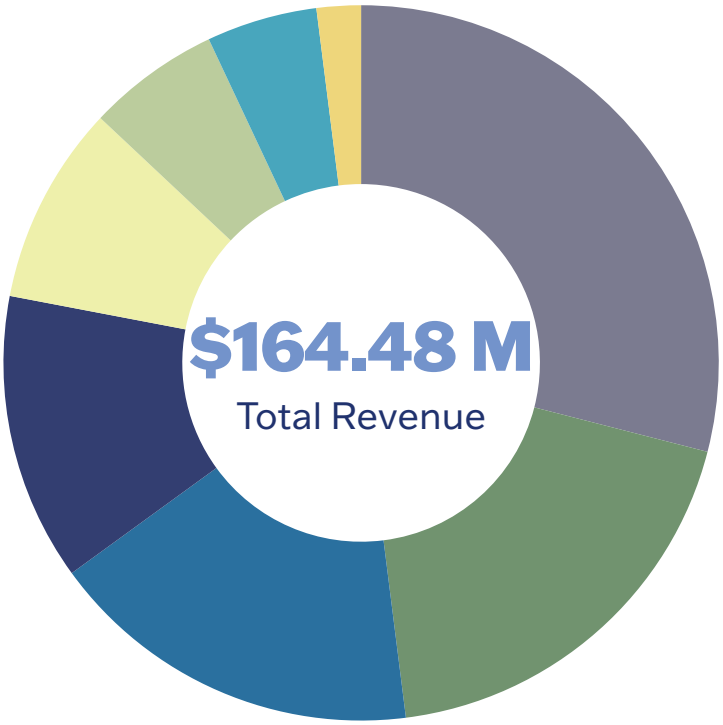
24%

($730 to $906)



UNC-CHAPEL HILL

Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024

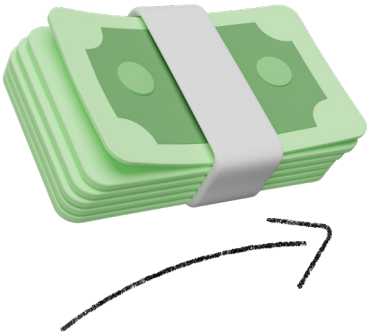


- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $47.59M (29%)
- Ticket Sales $31.23M (19%)
- Donor Contributions $28.47M (17%)
- Institutional/Government Support $21.36M (13%)*
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $14.03M (9%)
- Other Revenue $9.68M (6%)
- Student Fees $8.11M (5%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $4.01M (2%)

*UNC-Chapel Hill's FY2024 institutional support ($21.4 million) was unusually high. It fell to about $2 million in FY2025, but the athletics department ran a $15 million deficit that year, which athletics reserves covered.

Per Student Subsidy

$339.45





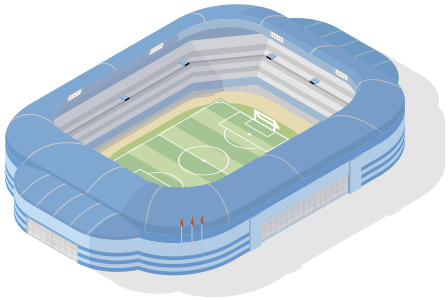
Highest Coach Salary

$10 million

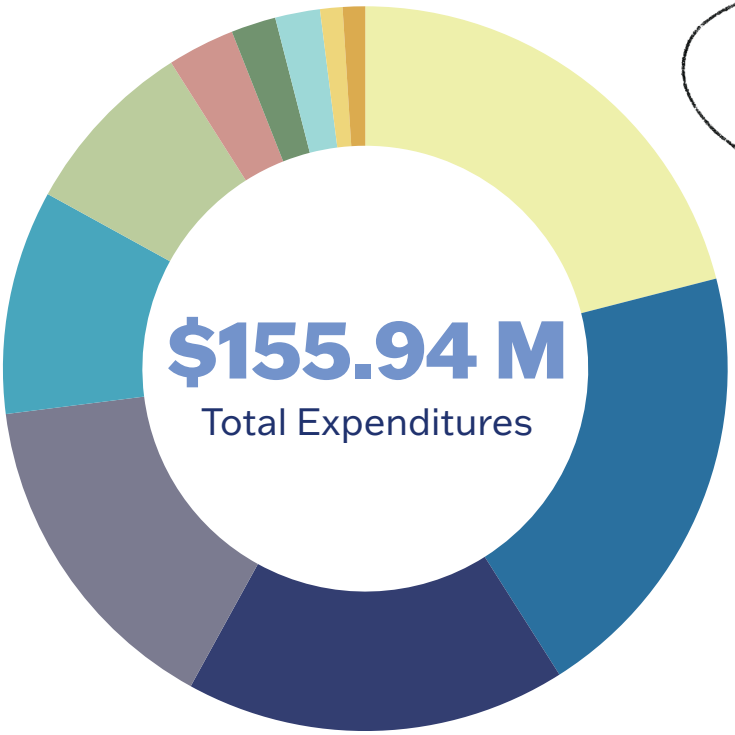
(football coach Bill Belichick)

17.91 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $32.81M (21%)
- Coaches Compensation $31.89M (20%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $27.25M (17%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $22.85M (15%)
- Athletic Student Aid $16.20M (10%)
- Other Expenses $11.72M (8%)
- Medical $3.90M (3%)
- Recruiting $3.24M (2%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $3.01M (2%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $2.05M (1%)
- Coaching Severance $1.01M (1%)

Athlete Graduation Rates



All Athletes

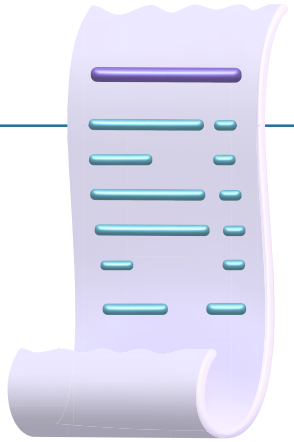
81%

Football

76%

Men's Basketball

54%



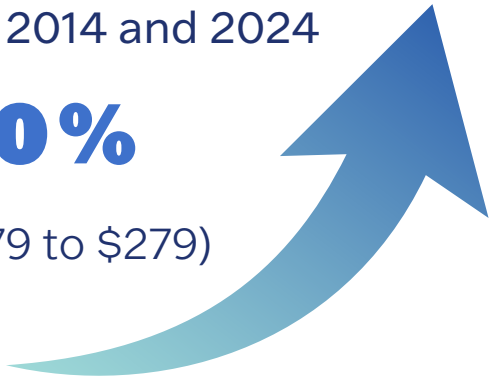
$279

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

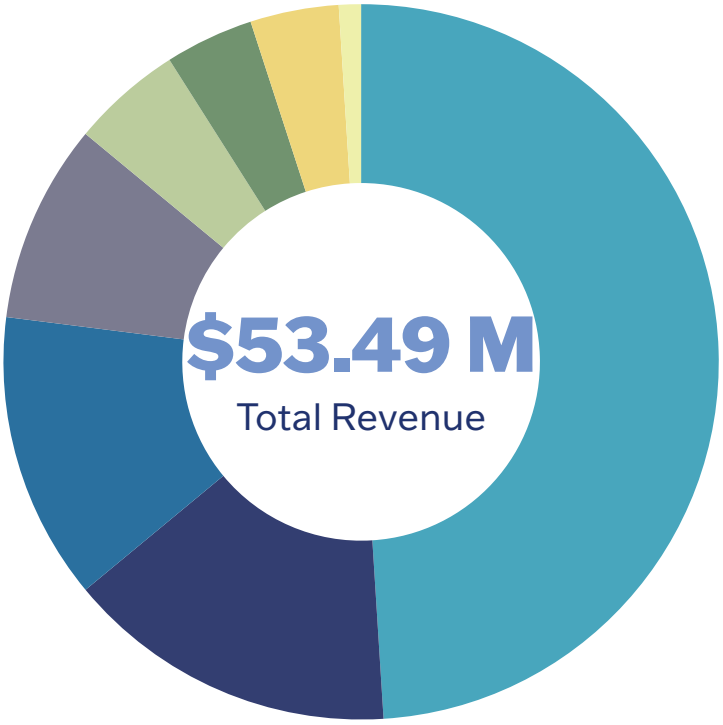
0%

($279 to $279)



UNC CHARLOTTE

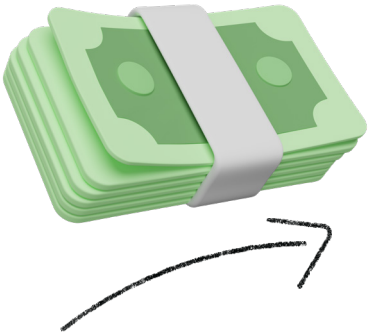
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Student Fees $26.09M (49%)
- Institutional/Government Support $7.85M (15%)
- Donor Contributions $7.09M (13%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $4.59M (9%)
- Other Revenue $2.48M (5%)
- Ticket Sales $2.09M (4%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $1.99M (4%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $1.31M (2%)

Per Student Subsidy

$1,432.56





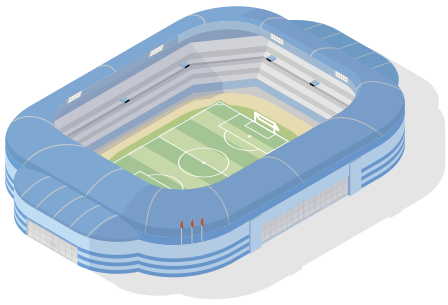
Highest Coach Salary

$900,000

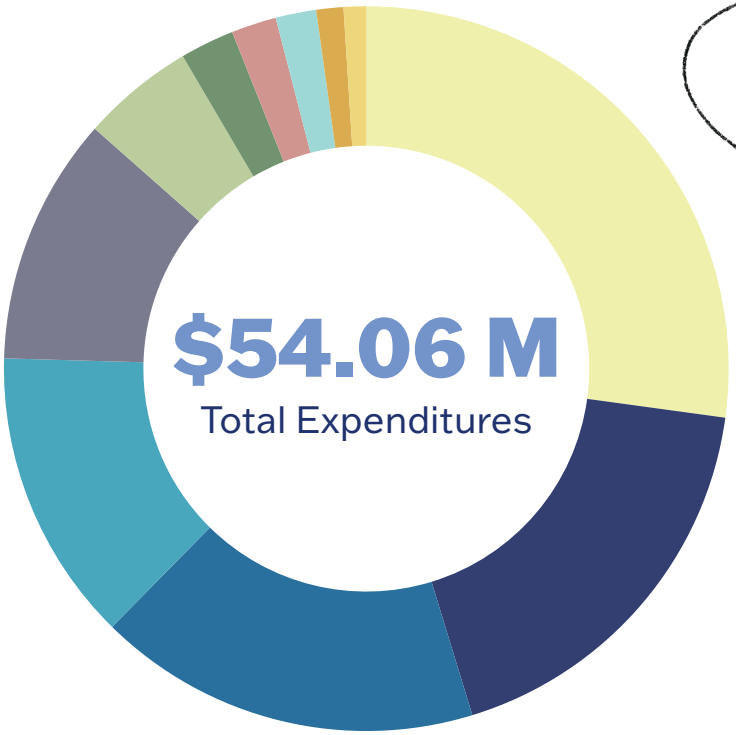
(men's basketball coach Wes Miller)

63.44 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $14.48M (27%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $9.51M (18%)
- Coaches Compensation $9.39M (17%)
- Athletic Student Aid $7.16M (13%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $6.03M (11%)
- Other Expenses $2.89M (5%)
- Recruiting $1.31M (2%)
- Medical $1.07M (2%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $1.00M (2%)
- Coaching Severance $0.67M (1%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $0.56M (1%)

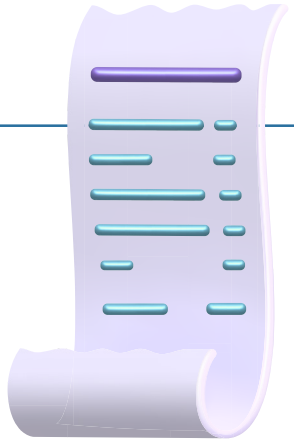
Athlete Graduation Rates



All Athletes
62%

Football
63%

Men's Basketball
25%



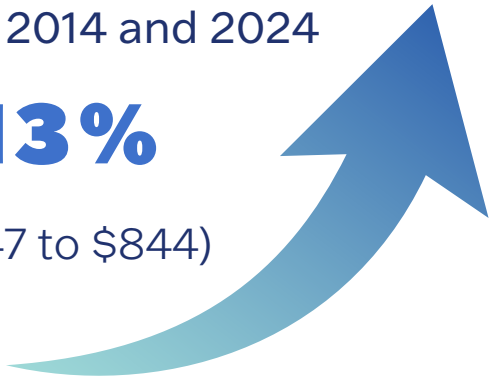
$844

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

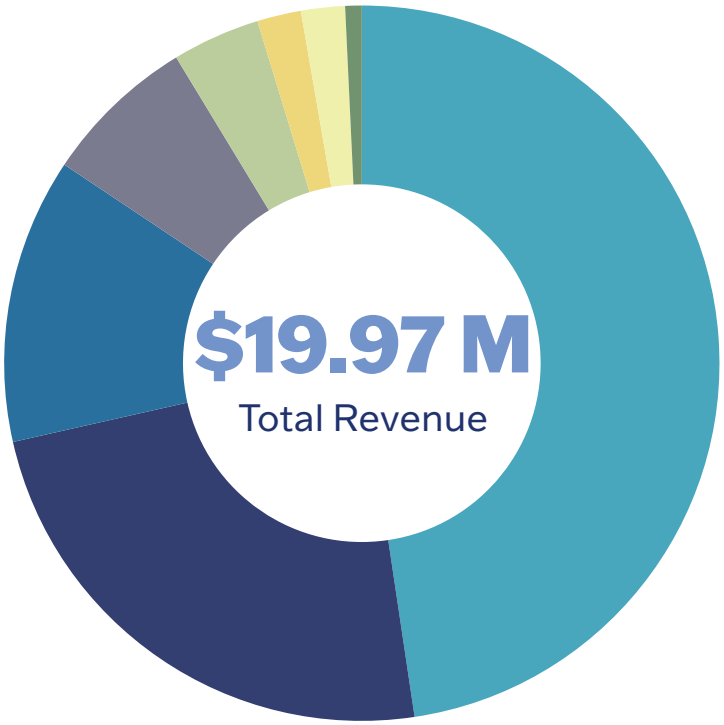
13%

($747 to $844)



UNC GREENSBORO

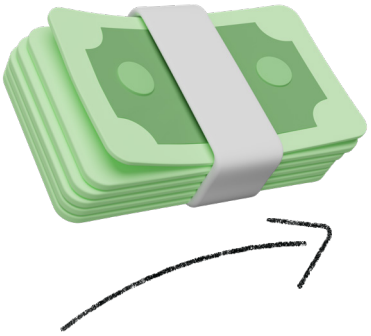
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Student Fees $9.62M (48%)
- Institutional/Government Support $4.77M (24%)
- Donor Contributions $2.54M (13%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $1.34M (7%)
- Other Revenue $0.88M (4%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $0.34M (2%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $0.32M (2%)
- Ticket Sales $0.15M (1%)

Per Student Subsidy

$981.31





Highest Coach Salary

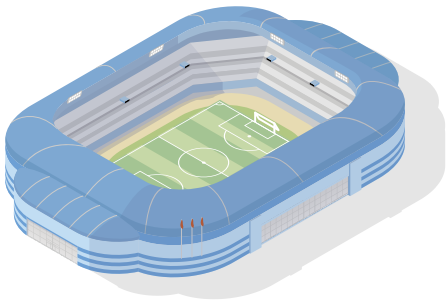
$369,332

(men's basketball coach Mike Jones)

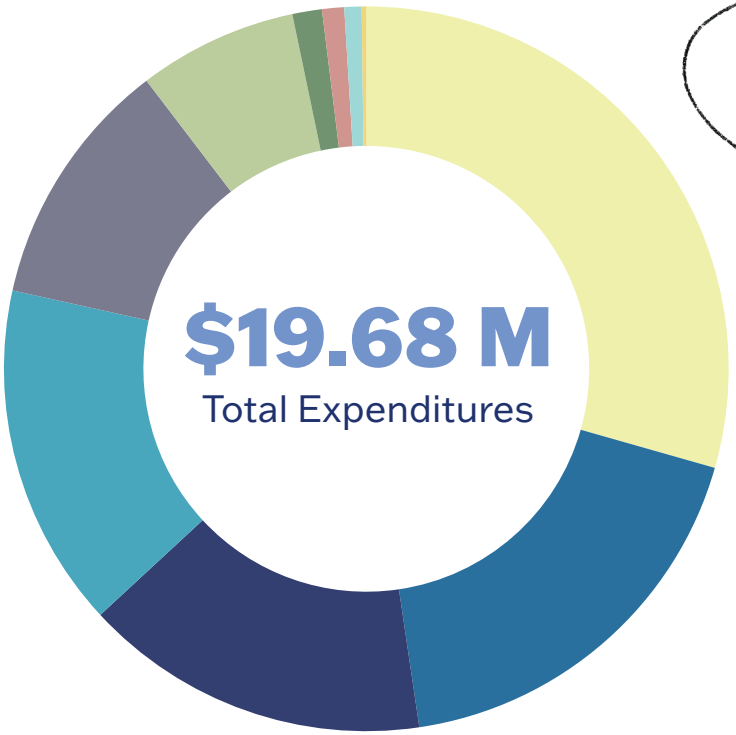
*Base salary only

72.08 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $5.78M (29%)
- Coaches Compensation $3.63M (18%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $3.00M (15%)
- Athletic Student Aid $2.98M (15%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $2.18M (11%)
- Other Expenses $1.48M (7%)
- Recruiting $0.26M (1%)
- Medical $0.19M (1%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $0.15M (1%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $0.04M (0%)

Athlete Graduation Rates



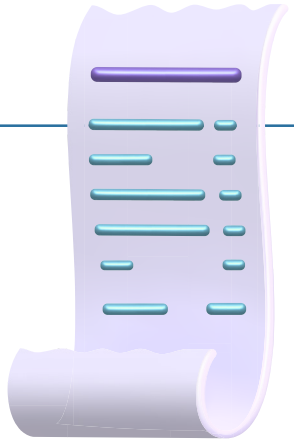
All Athletes

68%

No Football Team

Men's Basketball

82%



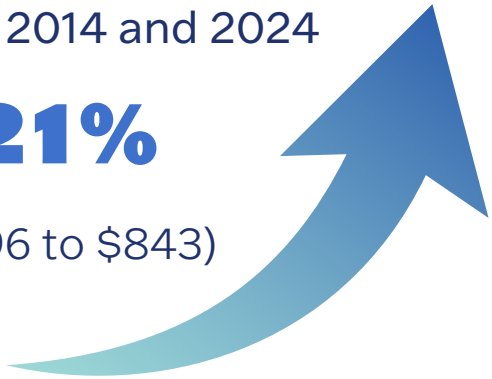
$843

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

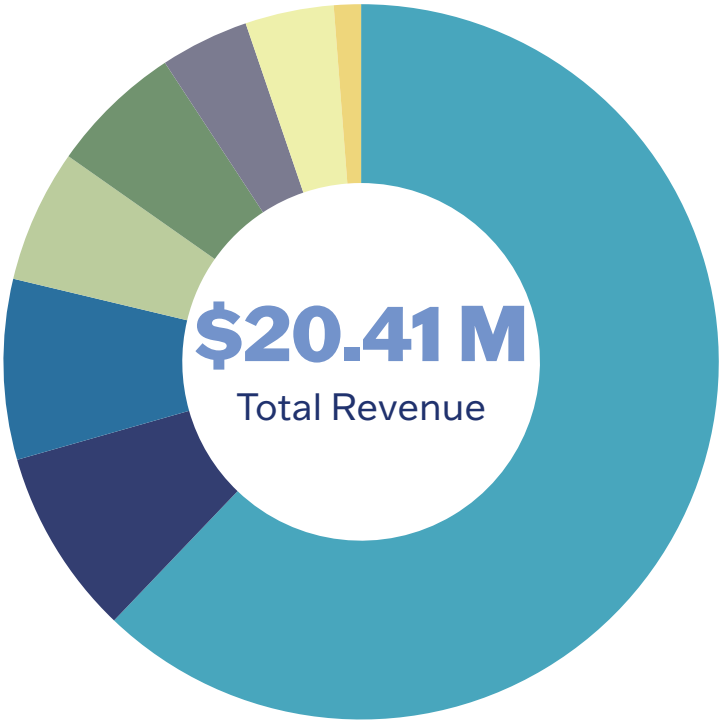
21%

($696 to $843)



UNC WILMINGTON

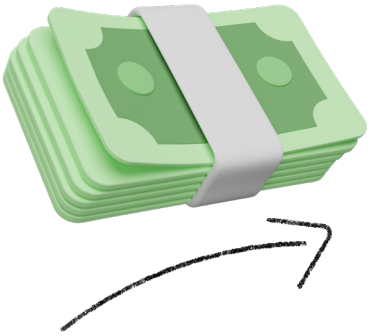
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Student Fees $12.74M (62%)
- Institutional/Government Support $1.72M (8%)
- Donor Contributions $1.66M (8%)
- Other Revenue $1.20M (6%)
- Ticket Sales $1.18M (6%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $0.84M (4%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $0.83M (4%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $0.25M (1%)

Per Student Subsidy

$941.42





Highest Coach Salary

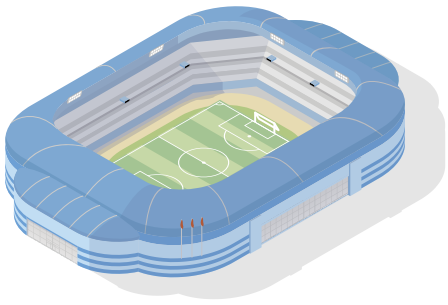
$1 million

(men's basketball coach Takayo Siddle)

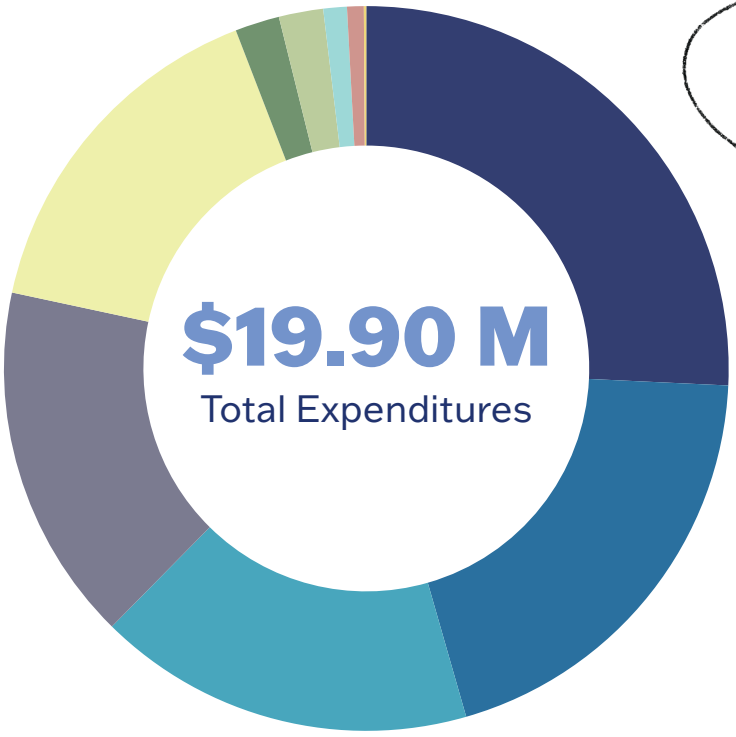


70.80 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $5.14M (26%)
- Coaches Compensation $3.99M (20%)
- Athletic Student Aid $3.38M (17%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $3.21M (16%)
- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $3.17M (16%)
- Recruiting $0.32M (2%)
- Other Expenses $0.31M (2%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $0.21M (1%)
- Medical $0.15M (1%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $0.02M (0%)

Athlete Graduation Rates



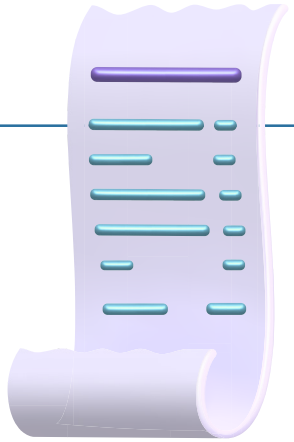
All Athletes

72%

No Football Team

Men's Basketball

30%



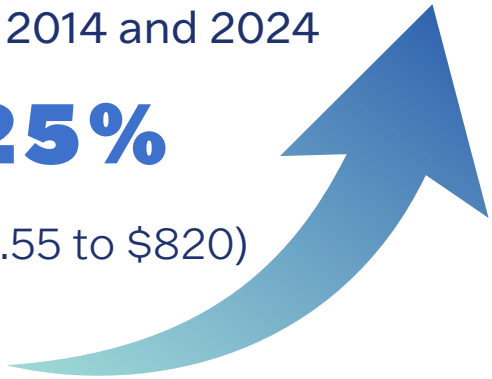
$820

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

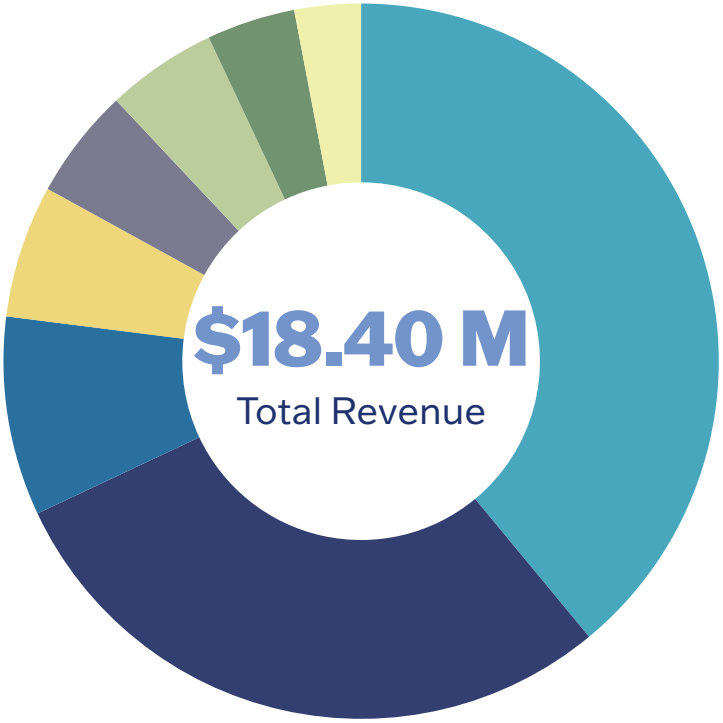
25%

($654.55 to $820)



WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

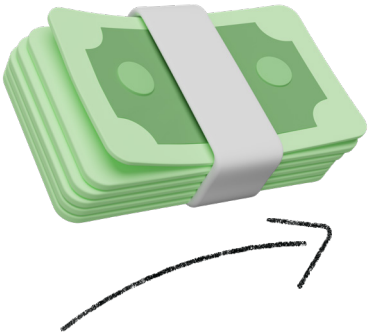
Total Athletics Revenue in Millions
FY 2024



- Student Fees $7.24M (39%)
- Institutional/Government Support $5.38M (29%)
- Donor Contributions $1.68M (9%)
- Competition Guarantees - Revenues $1.07M (6%)
- Conference/NCAA Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football $0.98M (5%)
- Other Revenue $0.88M (5%)
- Ticket Sales $0.65M (4%)
- Corporate Sponsorship, Advertising, and Licensing $0.51M (3%)

Per Student Subsidy

$1,353.61





Highest Coach Salary

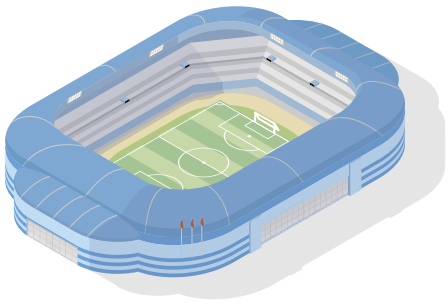
$300,000

(football coach Kerwin Bell)

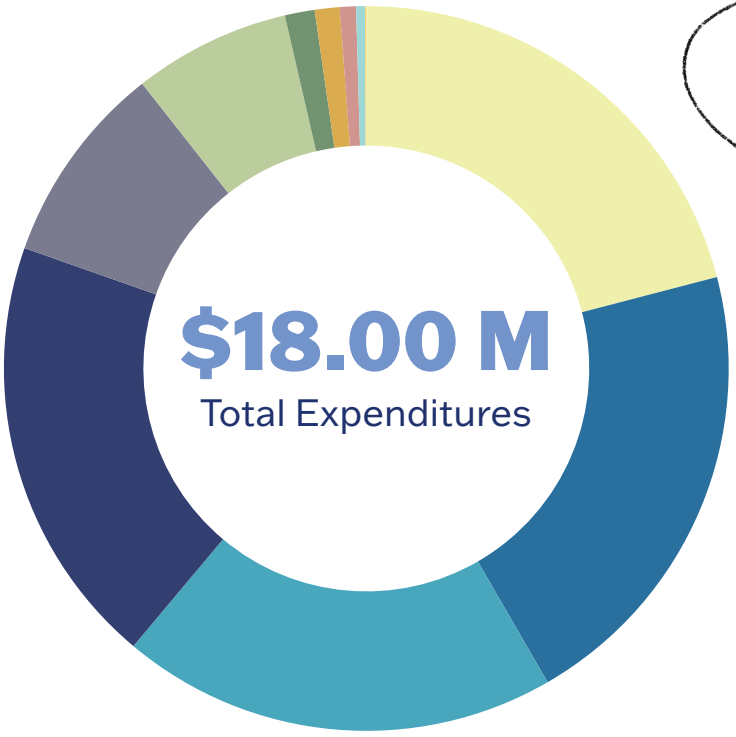
*Base salary only

68.61 %

Total Athletics Revenue From Institutional/Government Support and Student Fees



Total Athletics Expenses in Millions
FY 2024



- Facilities, Debt Service & Equipment $3.77M (21%)
- Coaches Compensation $3.73M (21%)
- Athletic Student Aid $3.50M (19%)
- Non-Coaching Staff Compensation $3.47M (19%)
- Game Expenses & Travel $1.66M (9%)
- Other Expenses $1.23M (7%)
- Recruiting $0.24M (1%)
- Coaching Severance $0.20M (1%)
- Medical $0.13M (1%)
- Student-Athlete Meals (non-travel) $0.07M (0%)
- Competition Guarantees (expenses) $0.01M (0%)

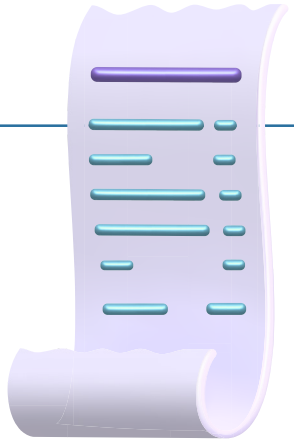
Athlete Graduation Rates



All Athletes
60%

Football
53%

Men's Basketball
38%



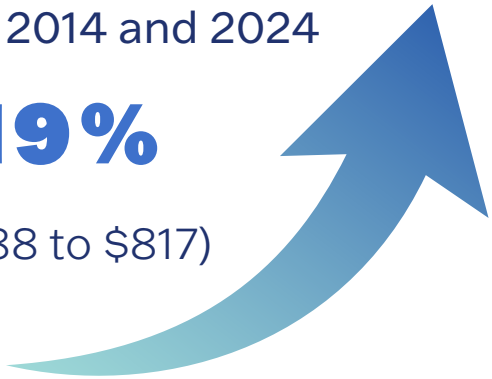
$817

Athletic Fee
(per student)

% increase in Athletics Fee between 2014 and 2024

19%

($688 to $817)



A VIEW FROM THE STATES

Reining in the college athletics arms race is not the national norm. A few states, however, have enacted meaningful restraints.

For example, Virginia passed a law in 2015 capping athletics revenue from institutional support and student fees. Power Four FBS schools are capped at 20 percent, other FBS schools at 55 percent, and Football Championship Subdivision schools (FCS) at 70 percent, and higher percentages for other division categories (the law uses outdated language to describe the divisions). Virginia's tiered revenue caps are worth imitating. Notably, the state updated its budget in 2026, prohibiting the use of general fund appropriations, tuition revenue, and E&G (educational and general) fees for college athletics. This means that the athletic departments will rely more heavily on student fees, which are still subject to the above caps.

Georgia similarly caps revenue sources in a tiered system, but goes an extra step by also capping spending growth for non-Power Four institutions. "Except for the Power [Four] institutions, total athletic operating expenses may not increase by more than 5% annually unless approved in advance by the Chancellor," says the Georgia Board of Regents policy manual.[5] Institutions are also not permitted to expend state appropriations on athletics, and general fund resources cannot support athletic scholarships.

Florida, Texas, and North Carolina have some athletics restrictions, but to a lesser degree. Florida limits the sum of the activity and service, health, and athletic fees to no more than 40 percent of students' tuition and cannot increase by more than 5 percent annually. In Texas, institutions require student approval before an athletics fee can be imposed. At the University of Texas at Arlington, for example, "The amount of the fee may not exceed $7.75 per semester credit hour for each regular semester" and cannot be imposed "unless approved by a majority vote of the students participating in a general student election held for that purpose." Any subsequent increases must also be student-approved. In North Carolina, the community colleges cannot use state funds, tuition revenue, or funds from student aid for athletics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reform of college sports is not one-size-fits-all. Institutions' paths to improvement will sometimes depend on their Division and financial status. The Martin Center recommends that the state, System, and institutions take the following applicable steps to reform college sports:

Ensure Financial Stability

- **Consider DIII:** Division III saves institutions significant amounts of money, which would help lower student fees. It would also relieve competitive pressure, allowing student-athletes to be students first. Dropping down to Division III allows students to enjoy many of the benefits of playing sports without sacrificing their studies. Specifically,
  - UNC Asheville should move from DI to DIII
  - Elizabeth City State University, Fayetteville State University, UNC Pembroke, and Winston-Salem State University should move from DII to DIII
- **State caps on NIL:** The allure of high NIL income introduces many complications. Student-athletes chase opportunities that promise fame and fortune, which sometimes leads them to transfer institutions multiple times. Their sights are on paychecks, not commitment to any specific course of study. Capping the amount student-athletes earn from NIL deals would reduce athletes' incentives to put education on the back burner.

5 This policy was written before the Power Five became the Power Four due to significant conference realignment in 2024.

- **End large buyouts:** The fact that coaches are paid more than the same institution's chancellor says a lot about a university's priorities. These large expenditures can be significantly curtailed by eliminating the large buyouts included in coach contracts.
- **Perform a sport-by-sport audit:** Identify the net cost of each sport as well as potential savings. Eliminate sports that are high cost and highly subsidized by fees and institutional funds. Pay close attention to the net costs of football at NC A&T, NC Central, and Western Carolina. In addition, women's basketball, track and field, and baseball often have high net costs.

Realign Athletics toward Academic Priorities

- **Reverse the NC statute that treats out-of-state athletes as in-state for tuition purposes:** Allowing nonresident student-athletes to be treated as resident students is unfair to North Carolina taxpayers who bear the increased financial burden. It also encourages "school hopping" among college athletes.
- **Pass a resolution against college sports gambling by an institution's board members:** All UNC System boards should join UNC Charlotte by adopting a similar resolution prohibiting board members from placing bets or wagers on their institutions' student-athletes and sports teams.
- **Make athletics fees à la carte:** Many students enjoy attending sports games during college. Many others, however, do not care for sports or do not want to pay for them annually. A student should not be required to fund the athletics department—especially not upwards of $800 a year.
- **End admissions exemptions and adopt the Martin Center's model** minimum admission requirements policy**:** To be eligible to apply to a UNC institution, all applicants should have a minimum 3.0 cumulative weighted GPA *and* a standardized test score of 1010 on the SAT (verbal and math) or an ACT composite of 21.
- **Adopt Student-Athlete Honor Codes:** Athletics departments have a Student-Athlete Code of Conduct, but they should adopt a Student-Athlete Honor Code that goes into greater depth of behavior expectations. Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, for example, has a Student-Athlete Honor Code informing students that "While a student-athlete's commitment to honesty and personal integrity is assumed and expected, this Code is intended to provide an added measure of assurance that [the athlete] is fulfilling the University's requirements." The university expects athletes to be "women and men of character," stating that "it is the student athlete's responsibility to read, understand and uphold the Student-Athlete Honor Code." Institutions should adopt an Honor Code and require every new athlete to sign it during orientation. Moreover, serious violations of that Honor Code should be met with equally serious consequences.

CONCLUSION

Countless alumni look back on their college years and fondly recall cheering for their home team. The spirit and connection sports foster can contribute positively to a campus's atmosphere by building community and encouraging healthy sportsmanship.

But a general rule also holds for college sports: all in proper measure. Too much of most things produces poor outcomes. Excessive focus on winning championships, landing television contracts, and boasting the most impressive stadiums cheapens the entire enterprise of college athletics, coming at no small cost to the institutions, taxpayers, and students that substantially subsidize them. Even more egregiously, it undercuts the foremost mission and responsibility of North Carolina higher education: to provide students with a high-quality education as affordably as possible.

The UNC System doesn't have to wait for the NCAA or Congress to act to address these important issues. North Carolina students who genuinely care about learning, and the citizens who support them, deserve better.

About the Author

Shannon Watkins

Shannon Watkins joined the Martin Center in March 2017 as a state reporter and later served as editor before assuming her current research role. She earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish and Linguistics from the University of California, Los Angeles, and studied at Carlos III University of Madrid in Spain.

Watkins writes policy briefs, articles, and research reports on a range of higher education issues, including general education reform, civil discourse, academic standards, and the liberal arts. Her work has appeared in outlets including the Manhattan Institute, *Academic Questions, The Imaginative Conservative, Ford Forum, Townhall, Washington Examiner, Daily Caller, and Carolina Journal.*



Watkins has presented papers at the Association for Core Texts and Courses' annual conferences on general education reform and the value of a great books education. She is an alumna of America's Future Foundation's Writing Fellows Program and the State Policy Network's Generation Liberty Fellowship. She also manages the Martin Center's internship program.

About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

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