U.S. Government Accountability Office

College Athletics: Most Programs Spend More Than They Generate in Revenue

GAO-26-108640
Q&A Report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and Workforce, House of Representatives
July 14, 2026

Why This Matters

Many colleges spend millions of dollars on their athletics programs. The landscape of college athletics has changed as several lawsuits have addressed student-athletes and compensation for the use of their name, image, and likeness. For example, the 2025 settlement of the *In re College Athlete NIL Litigation* case (commonly known as the *House* settlement) permits Division I (DI) colleges to share up to $20.5 million with student-athletes beginning in the 2025–26 academic year. For that year, 310 of 361 DI colleges participated in the revenue sharing arrangement under this settlement. The amount of revenue these colleges publicly distributed to student-athletes was not available at the time of our review. This revenue sharing may impact finances for some college athletics programs, and the annual cap is scheduled to increase in subsequent years.

There has been federal interest in these recent legal developments in college athletics. Recent Executive Orders and proposed legislation include provisions related to name, image, and likeness agreements; revenue sharing; and athlete compensation; among other things. In light of these developments and increasing financial pressures facing colleges due to declining enrollment and rising costs, we were asked to examine how colleges fund athletics programs. This report provides information about DI and Division II (DII) athletics finances prior to the *House* settlement to depict the landscape before revenue sharing took effect. For this report, we analyzed financial data that colleges report annually to the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

Key Takeaways

- **DI Spending:** In the 2023–24 academic year, DI colleges reported spending a total of $20.8 billion on athletics. The 69 “Power” colleges (those in the most competitive DI conferences) accounted for more than half of this spending. Spending totals increased from a decade earlier in all four DI subdivisions but grew the most among the Power colleges.
- **DI Generated Revenue and Spending Gap:** To help cover athletics expenses, DI colleges reported generating $13.1 billion in revenue (mostly by Power colleges) largely from selling media rights to broadcasts, ticket sales, and donations. However, 94 percent of all DI athletics programs (330 of 352 colleges) spent more than they generated in athletics revenue. The majority of DI colleges spent $11 million-$32.3 million more than they generated in revenue, and the median gap was $20.6 million. This gap widened from a decade earlier as spending increased more than generated revenue in all DI subdivisions.
- **DI College Contributions:** As generated revenue generally did not cover program expenses, most DI colleges reported contributing substantial funding to support athletics programs. These college contributions are funded by tuition and fees paid by students, as well as other unrestricted funds from the

college. College contributions indirectly include federal funds students receive in federal student aid to pay their tuition and fees. In the 2023–24 academic year, DI athletics programs received a total of $7.2 billion in college contributions. The median college for each subdivision contributed between about $3,200 and $10,800 per undergraduate student (both athletes and non-athletes) over the course of a 4-year degree. These amounts are illustrative estimates and do not reflect actual student payments to athletics programs.

- **DII College Athletics:** Overall, DII college athletics programs reported spending $2.7 billion in the 2023–24 academic year. All DII athletics programs spent more than the revenue they generated. The revenue DII athletics programs reported generating that year covered 14 percent of total expenses. Thus, DII colleges contributed a total of $2.3 billion to cover athletics program expenses.
- **Athletics Debt:** Over time, some colleges have taken on debt to pay for athletics. The percentage of colleges holding athletics debt varied widely across colleges. Nearly all Power colleges reported athletics debt in academic year 2023–24, and the median value of this debt was $120.3 million.

How are Division I and Division II athletics programs organized?

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) organizes intercollegiate athletics programs into divisions, subdivisions, and conferences.[1] These groups set the structure for athletics competitions, such as the rules around how many games they play, which colleges compete against each other, and how post-season tournaments are organized.[2] DI colleges compete at the highest level and can offer students full athletics scholarships, while DII colleges typically offer partial athletics scholarships. Division III colleges do not provide athletics scholarships and are not included in the scope of this report.

DI includes three subdivisions: the Football Bowl Subdivision; Football Championship Subdivision (Championship); and Basketball Subdivision (Basketball), also known as the Non-Football Subdivision. The Football Bowl Subdivision conferences are generally seen as the most competitive in college football. Within this subdivision, certain conferences have unique governing powers compared to the other conferences and are also referred to as the Autonomy conferences. Under NCAA rules, they are granted autonomy to set their own rules related to educational or athletics needs of student-athletes. The Autonomy conferences tend to be considered the most elite conferences and are typically referred to as the “Power” conferences.[3] For purposes of this report, we analyzed data on the Power and Non-Power conferences in the Football Bowl Subdivision and the Championship and Basketball subdivisions (for presentation purposes, we refer to each group as subdivisions).

Within DII, there are two main categories of athletics programs—those colleges with and those without football programs. See table 1 for more information on the DI and DII subdivisions.

Table 1: Six Subgroups of Colleges in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I and II, Academic Year 2023–24

Division (total colleges)[a]	Subdivision		Total colleges	Total student-athletes
I (352)	Football Bowl Subdivision	Power conferences	69	40,486
		Non-Power conferences	61	28,990
	Football Championship Subdivision (Championship)		125	61,344
	Basketball Subdivision (no football) (Basketball)		97	33,822
II (297)	Football		159	73,036
	Non-Football		138	43,489

Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I and II documents and data. | GAO-26-108640

[a]The number of colleges in a division can vary from year to year. This table shows the number of colleges and student-athletes as reported in the NCAA membership financial data for the 2023–24 academic year. For that year, all DI colleges submitted data and 95 percent of DII colleges (297 of a total 313 DII colleges) submitted data.

During the 2023–2024 academic year, what did DI college athletics programs spend money on?

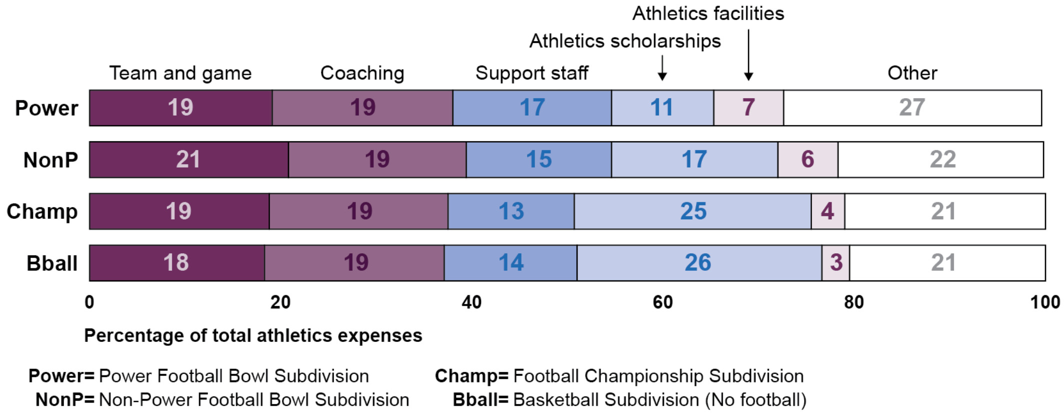
In the 2023–24 academic year, DI colleges reported spending a total of $20.8 billion on college athletics. The largest proportion of spending in each subdivision went to team and game expenses (including team travel, equipment and uniforms, and medical expenses), compensation for coaches and support staff, and athletics scholarships.[4] NCAA rules have historically imposed limits on the number of athletic scholarships that can be awarded at DI colleges, which may have resulted in less spending on athletics scholarships than the other large categories of spending. DI subdivisions spent less on athletics facilities and other expenses, including those related to recruiting; fundraising, marketing, and promotion; severance; memberships and dues; and sports camps.[5]

Total spending. The 69 Power colleges spent more than all other 283 DI colleges combined, accounting for more than half of the total $20.8 billion in DI athletics spending (55.1 percent).

- Median athletics spending across the 69 Power colleges was nearly $167 million. This was between three and seven times higher than the medians across the Non-Power, Championship, and Basketball subdivisions ($49 million, $25 million, and $23 million, respectively).
- The lowest spending Power college spent nearly $90 million, which was more than at least 271 of the 283 other DI colleges.[6]

Proportions of spending. DI subdivisions spent similar proportions on team and game expenses, coaching compensation, and support staff compensation (see fig.1). Team and game expenses and coaching compensation made up the largest and second largest proportions of spending for both the 69 Power and 61 Non-Power colleges.[7] In contrast, larger proportions of athletics spending went towards athletics scholarships in the Championship and Basketball subdivisions, as compared to the Power and Non-Power subdivisions.

Figure 1: Categories of Spending as a Percentage of Total Athletics Expenses for Division I Subdivisions, Academic Year 2023–24



Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

Note: Percentages for the listed expense categories are of total spending at the subdivision level; percentages for individual colleges vary. GAO combined several expense variables as "team and game expenses," including team travel, sports equipment, and student-athlete meals. The "other" category includes expenses such as recruiting; fundraising, marketing, and promotion; severance; memberships and dues; sports camps; miscellaneous operating expenses; and expenses related to football bowl expenses and compensation. For the purposes of this report, GAO analyzed data on the Football Bowl Subdivision Power and Non-Power conferences and the Championship and Basketball subdivisions (referring to each as subdivisions). Percentages in the figure do not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Magnitude of spending. Although proportionally DI subdivisions spent the most on the same types of expenses, Power colleges spent substantially more than other colleges, as summarized below.

- **Team and game expenses:** Team travel was the largest component of the "team and game expense" category. The median Power college spent from more than double to five times the median in the Non-Power, Championship, and Basketball subdivisions ($10.3 million compared to $4.2 million, $2.5 million, and $2.0 million, respectively).
- **Coaching compensation:** The median Power college spent about three to seven times more than the median in the other three subdivisions on coaching ($30.8 million, compared to $9.3 million, $4.7 million, and $4.2 million, respectively). The 14 highest spending Power colleges each spent more than $38 million on coaching. The Power college that spent the least on coaching (roughly $14 million) spent more than at least 80 percent of Non-Power and Championship colleges and more than any Basketball college.[8]
- **Administrative and support staff compensation:** The median Power college spent nearly four times the median Non-Power college and over eight times the median Championship and Basketball colleges on support staff—$26.9 million compared to $7.3 million, $3.3 million, and $3.1 million, respectively. The 14 highest spending Power colleges each spent more than $35 million on support staff.
- **Athletics scholarships:** Championship and Basketball colleges spent a greater proportion of their athletics expenses on athletics scholarships than Power colleges. However, the median Power college spent more than twice as much on scholarships in dollar terms than the other subdivisions ($17.5 million compared to $5.9 million to $8.7 million).[9] Additionally, most Power colleges spent at least $12.4 million on scholarships, which was more than at least 225 of the 283 other DI colleges.[10]

Severance Payments

Severance payments represent compensation that college athletics programs paid to past coaches and staff who no longer provide services to the college or its students. Severance payments comprised a small portion of overall Division I (DI) athletics spending in the 2023–24 academic year (less than 1 percent to 2 percent in each DI subdivision). However, many colleges reported making severance payments (177 of 352), and at least 40 reported payments in the millions. Almost all DI “Power” colleges (90 percent) reported paying severance in academic year 2023–24—the highest proportion among all DI subdivisions. Fifty-seven percent of the “Non-Power” colleges reported making severance payments—the highest rate among all other subdivisions. More colleges reported making severance payments in every DI subdivision in the 2023–24 academic year compared to a decade earlier (the 2014-15 academic year).

For those Power colleges with severance payments, the median college spent $1.5 million in the 2023–24 academic year (more than four times the median of $328,000 a decade earlier (not adjusted for inflation)). Total severance payment amounts varied widely across these Power colleges. The 20 percent of these Power colleges that spent the most on severance each spent about $5 million or more. In contrast, the 20 percent of these Power colleges that spent the least each spent about $440,000 or less.

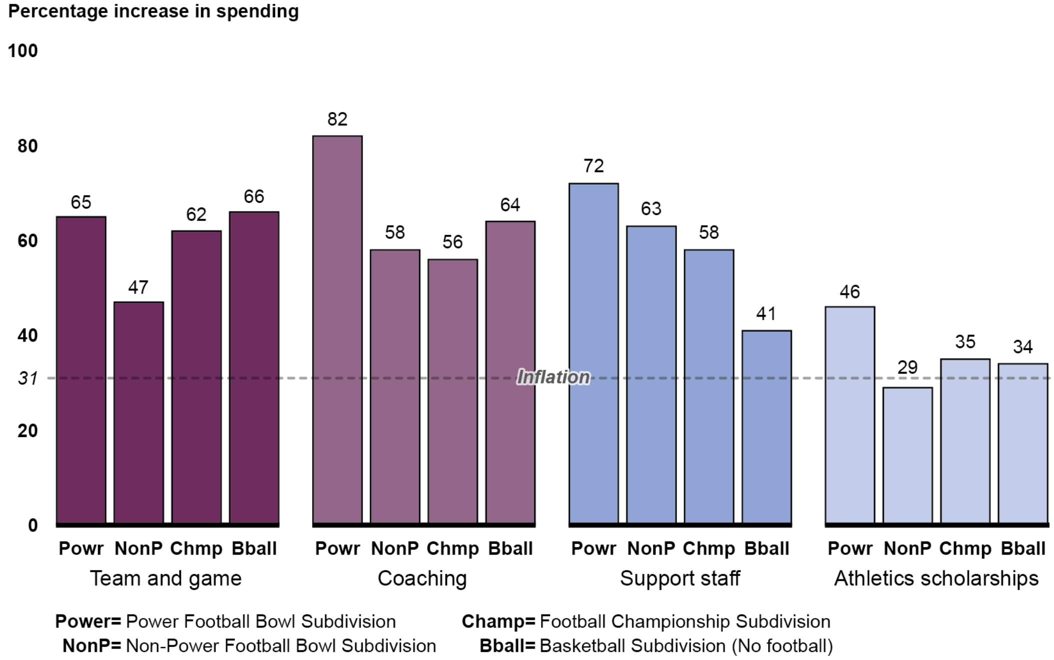
Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

How did DI athletics spending change from academic year 2014–2015 to 2023–2024?

Reported athletics spending increased in all four DI subdivisions between the 2014–15 and 2023–24 academic years, though the Power colleges had the largest increase. The median spent on athletics in the Power colleges increased by 81 percent (from $92.2 million to $166.8 million). The other DI subdivisions had smaller increases at the medians: 53 percent for Non-Power, 58 percent for Championship, and 51 percent for Basketball. We report the expenditure amounts and changes in nominal terms (not adjusted for inflation).[11] Between the 2014–15 and 2023–24 academic years, inflation was 31 percent using the Consumer Price Index.

Between these 2 academic years, changes in spending varied across subdivisions and types of expenses (see fig. 2). Power colleges had the largest increases in spending compared to the other subdivisions, except for in the team and game category. By subdivision, Power colleges saw their largest increase in coaching expenses, while Non-Power colleges saw their largest increase in support staff expenses. Meanwhile, each subdivision had its smallest increase in spending on athletics scholarships which may, in part, be a result of the NCAA’s scholarship limits in place at the time.

Figure 2: Percentage Increases in Average Spending on Largest Expenses for Division I Subdivisions, Academic Year 2014–15 to 2023–24



Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

Note: Team and game, coaching, support staff, and athletics scholarships expenses accounted for the highest proportion of spending across all four subdivisions in the 2023–24 academic year. GAO combined several expense variables as "team and game expenses," including team travel, sports equipment, and medical expenses. GAO did not include student-athlete meals in the "team and game expenses" when analyzing changes between the 2 years because in the 2014–15 academic year, NCAA's reporting form did not include student-athlete meal expense data as a specific reporting category. The percentage changes in spending on coaching, support staff, and athletics scholarships were calculated using the medians for each subdivision. The percentage changes in spending on team and game expenses were calculated using the means for each subdivision. Percent increases for the expense categories are for the subdivision level; changes for individual colleges vary. GAO reports nominal numbers, instead of inflation-adjusted numbers, to ensure consistency between our reported numbers and other publicly available numbers. GAO shows the inflation rate using the Consumer Price Index in this figure with a dotted line. For the purposes of this report, GAO analyzed data on the Football Bowl Subdivision Power and Non-Power conferences and the Championship and Basketball subdivisions (referring to each as subdivisions).

In addition to increases in the largest spending categories, DI subdivisions saw a range of increases in other expenses between the 2 academic years.

Facilities. Spending on athletics facilities (including leases, rent, and debt service) comprised a small share of total spending across the DI subdivisions in the 2023–24 academic year (6 to 7 percent for Power and Non-Power, 3.5 percent for Championship, and 2.9 percent for Basketball). However, there was large variation across the subdivisions in how this expense changed at the median. Median spending on facilities increased the most for Championship colleges—170 percent (from $105,200 in the 2014–15 academic year to $284,500 in the 2023–24 academic year)—and the least for Basketball colleges—23 percent (from $153,500 to $188,200).

Recruiting. Spending related to recruiting—transportation, lodging, and meals for prospective student-athletes—accounted for less than 2 percent of total athletics spending in each of the four DI subdivisions in the 2023–24 academic year.[12] However, there was large variation across the subdivisions in how recruiting spending changed at the median. Median spending on recruiting increased the most for Power colleges—115 percent (from $1.4 million in the 2014–15 academic year to $3.1 million in the 2023–24 academic year)—and the least for Basketball colleges—17 percent (from $231,800 to $270,300).

How do DI colleges fund their athletics programs?

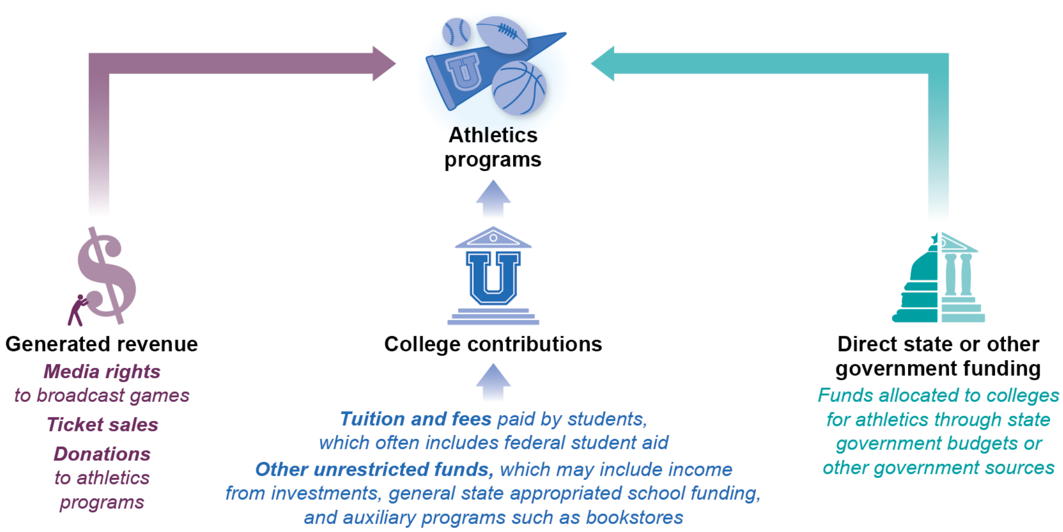
The money DI colleges reported using to pay for athletics programs comes from three primary sources. Athletic programs generate a portion of their revenue from sources like media rights, sports camps, and ticket sales. Some also receive direct state or other government funding—funds allocated directly to athletics through government budgets.

In cases where revenue generated by colleges' athletics programs and state and other government funding do not fully cover expenses, colleges contribute to athletics programs from their general funds and student fees.[13] College general funds are unrestricted funds that come from a variety of sources, including tuition, and that can be used for the college's operations and specific programs, like athletics.[14] Federal student aid, such as grants and loans, often are used by students to pay for tuition and fees and therefore may indirectly support athletics programs through colleges' contributions from general funds.

Most athletics programs incorporate college general funds and student fees into their annual budgets and make these budgetary decisions along with college leadership, according to a representative of a stakeholder group representing college athletics staff. Colleges may consider a variety of factors in making decisions about funding their athletics program spending, such as how investment in athletics could affect sports team competitiveness, student enrollment, and the college's brand. Reliance on college general funds to cover expenses is not unique to athletics and occurs across academic departments, according to a representative of a college business association.

Figure 3 depicts the primary sources of funding DI colleges used to pay for their athletic programs.

Figure 3: Athletics Program Funding Sources Across Division I Colleges, Academic Year 2023–24



Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data and related documentation. | GAO-26-108640

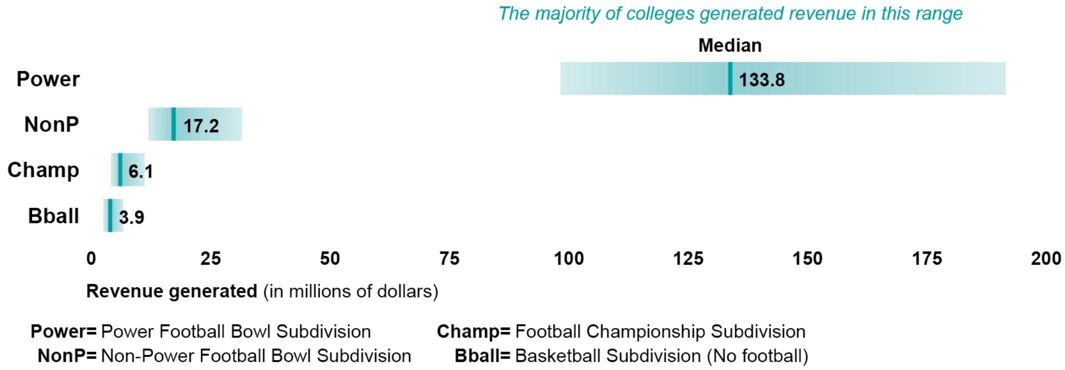
Note: This diagram is illustrative of the main funding sources and does not represent the magnitude of the funding sources.

To what extent did revenue generated by DI college athletics programs fund their programs?

Revenue generated by colleges' athletics programs was a primary source of funding reported for DI college athletics programs overall. However, there was wide variation across the subdivisions in the extent to which generated revenue funded their programs in the 2023–24 academic year. The Power colleges generated most of their total funding (89 percent). The other DI subdivisions generated much smaller percentages of their total funding: 44 percent for Non-Power, 30 percent for Championship, and 24 percent for Basketball. In addition:

- Power colleges generated $10 billion in revenue—more than three times the combined total of all other DI colleges ($3 billion).
- The majority of the Power colleges (the middle 60 percent) generated $98.2 million to $191.5 million in revenue, which is more than any college generated in the other DI subdivisions (see fig. 4).[15]

Figure 4: Typical Revenue Amounts Generated Across Division I College Athletics Programs by Subdivision, Academic Year 2023–24

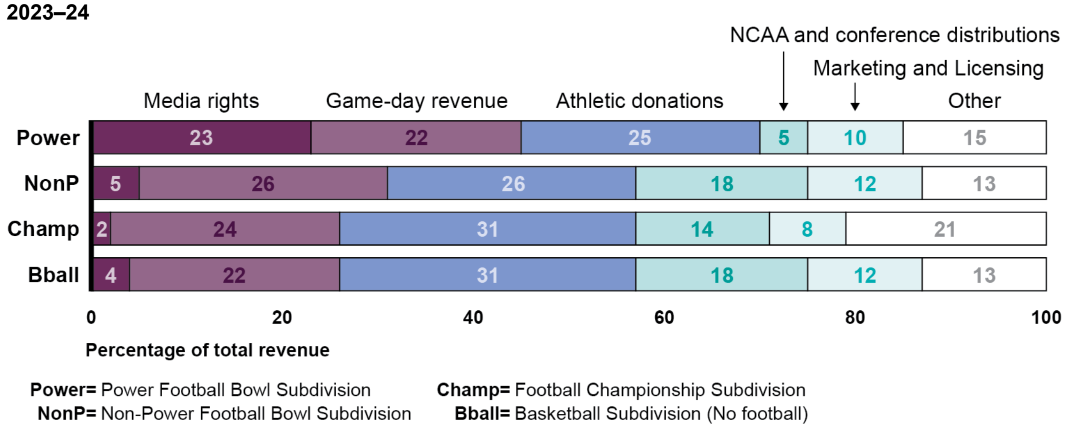


Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

Note: The horizontal bars represent the middle 60 percent of revenue generated by Division I college athletics programs within each subdivision. GAO focused on this range to minimize the influence of extreme outliers and reflect typical values. The vertical lines represent the median values. The medians shown reflect the middle value across all colleges in each Division I subdivision. For the purposes of this report, GAO analyzed data on the Football Bowl Subdivision Power and Non-Power conferences and the Championship and Basketball subdivisions (referring to each as subdivisions).

The primary sources of revenue generated by athletics programs differed across subdivisions (see fig. 5). In the 2023–24 academic year, the Power colleges generated the largest amounts from media rights, game day revenue, and athletics donations. The three other DI subdivisions relied more on NCAA and conference distributions than the Power subdivision, though donations and game day earnings were also top sources of generated revenue across these subdivisions. College athletics programs also generated revenue from additional sources, such as royalties, licensing, advertisement, and sponsorships, shown as marketing and licensing in figure 5.

Figure 5: Generated Revenue Sources for Division I Athletics Programs by Subdivision, Academic Year 2023–24



Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

Note: The category "other" includes revenue from in-kind contributions, sports camps, athletics endowment and investments income, football bowls, and third-party compensation, among other miscellaneous sources. NCAA and Conference distributions are payments received from the NCAA and athletic conferences, such as championship reimbursements. Marketing and Licensing refers to royalties, licensing, advertisement, and sponsorships. For the purposes of this report, GAO analyzed data on the Football Bowl Subdivision Power and Non-Power conferences and the Championship and Basketball subdivisions (referring to each as subdivisions).

Media Rights. The most substantial differences between subdivisions were in how much money they generated selling media rights to broadcast games, primarily through television.[16] In the 2023–24 academic year, revenues from selling media rights accounted for 23 percent of total generated revenue for the Power subdivision ($2.3 billion). All but two of the 69 Power colleges reported generating some revenue from media rights, compared to 29 to 54 percent of the colleges in the other three subdivisions. The $2.3 billion generated by Power colleges from media rights alone was almost as high as all revenue generated by other colleges combined ($3.1 billion). The median media rights revenue for Power colleges ($33.4 million) was more than five times the maximum amount generated by any program in other subdivisions ($6.2 million). The median amounts generated among Non-Power, Championship, and Basketball colleges that received any funds from media rights were $1.8 million, $75,000, and $88,000, respectively.

Game Day Revenue and Athletics Donations. Game day revenue and athletics donations each accounted for similar portions of total generated revenue across DI subdivisions in the 2023–24 academic year (22–26 percent and 25–31 percent, respectively). However, dollar amounts generated by the Power colleges were substantially higher.[17]

- The median Power college generated $28.0 million in game day revenue. This was about six to 40 times the medians in the Non-Power, Championship, and Basketball subdivisions ($4.5 million, $1.6 million, and $0.7 million, respectively). Most game day revenue generated by DI athletics programs came from ticket sales (78 percent of total game day revenue).
- The top 20 percent of Power colleges received $56.9 million or more in athletics program donations. The median Power college received $30.8 million. This was about eight to 26 times the medians in the other three DI subdivisions ($3.9 million, $1.6 million, and $1.2 million, respectively).

Growth Over Time in Generated Revenue. Between the 2014–15 and 2023–24 academic years, revenue generated by athletics programs increased across all DI subdivisions.

- Total DI generated revenue increased from $8.2 billion to $13.1 billion during this period (a 60 percent increase).
- Increases in median generated revenue varied by subdivision. The median athletics program among Power colleges generated 56 percent more revenue between these 2 years ($133.8 million compared to $85.7 million). Median generated revenue increased 38, 50, and 35 percent for the Non-Power, Championship, and Basketball subdivisions, respectively.

How has the amount of revenue generated by DI college athletics programs compared to athletics spending?

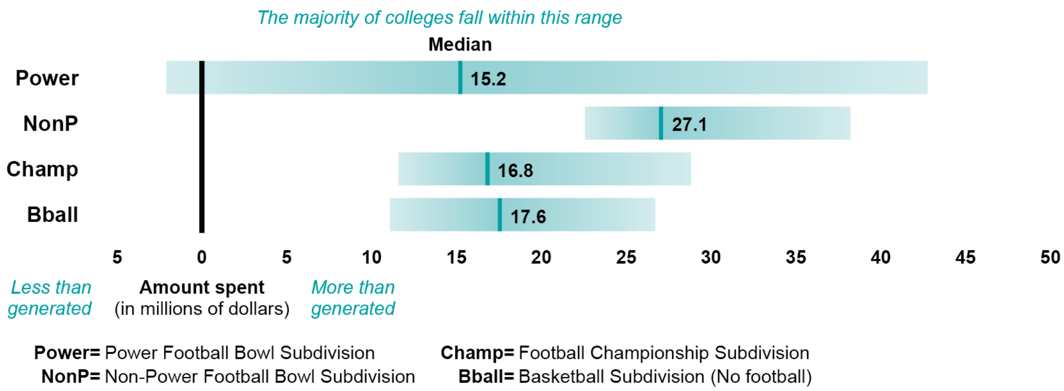
In the 2023–24 academic year, 94 percent of all DI college athletics programs reported spending more than they generated in revenue (330 of 352 colleges). Of the 22 colleges that generated more revenue than they spent, 20 were Power colleges. The median gap between spending and generated revenue for DI colleges was $20.6 million, and the majority of DI colleges (middle 60 percent) spent $11 million to $32.3 million more than they generated.[18] As previously discussed, colleges consider a variety of factors in making financial decisions about their athletics program, such as how investment in athletics could affect sports team competitiveness, student enrollment, and the college's brand. These types of decisions may affect the relationship between spending and revenue in colleges' athletics programs.

The gap between spending and generated revenue varied across colleges in each subdivision, though the median gap for Power, Championship, and Basketball college athletics programs were similar.

- In the 2023–24 academic year, the Non-Power subdivision had the largest median gap at $27.1 million, with the majority of colleges (middle 60 percent) spending $22.6 to 38.2 million more than the revenue they generated.
- Variation within subdivisions was greatest among Power colleges. For example, almost a third of Power colleges (20 of 69 colleges) generated more revenue than they spent on their athletic programs. The rest (49 colleges) spent more than they generated. The 20 percent (about 14 colleges) with the largest gap spent between $42.7 million and $90.5 million more than the revenue they generated.[19]

Figure 6 depicts the gap between spending and generated revenue among the middle 60 percent of DI college athletics programs, by subdivision.

Figure 6: Typical Gap Between Spending and Generated Revenue for Division I College Athletics Programs by Subdivision, Academic Year 2023–24



Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

Note: The horizontal bars represent the middle 60 percent of Division I college athletics programs in each subdivision. GAO focused on these ranges to minimize the influence of extreme outliers and reflect typical values. Among the middle 60 percent of Power colleges, six college athletics programs generated more revenue than they spent. The vertical lines in the bars represent the median values. The medians shown reflect the middle value across all colleges in each Division I subdivision. For the purposes of this report, GAO analyzed data on the Football Bowl Subdivision Power and Non-Power conferences and the Championship and Basketball subdivisions (referring to each as subdivisions).

In terms of changes over time, more Power colleges reported a gap between athletics program spending and generated revenue in the 2023–24 academic year than in the 2014–15 academic year. Specifically, 71 percent spent more than they generated in academic year 2023–24 (49 of 69 colleges), up from 65 percent a decade earlier (42 of 65 colleges). In the other subdivisions, athletics program spending exceeded generated revenue at nearly all colleges in both academic years.[20]

The median gap between spending and generated revenue grew for all subdivisions over the decade. For Power colleges, the median gap grew from $2.7 million to $15.2 million (more than a five-fold increase). Increases in the median gap for the other subdivisions ranged from 40 percent for Championship to 49 percent for Basketball during the same period.

The growth in the median gap stemmed from expenses increasing more than generated revenue during this period. For example, median athletic program spending among Power colleges rose by 81 percent, while median generated revenue increased by 56 percent. Growth in expenses similarly outpaced growth in generated revenue in the other subdivisions.[21]

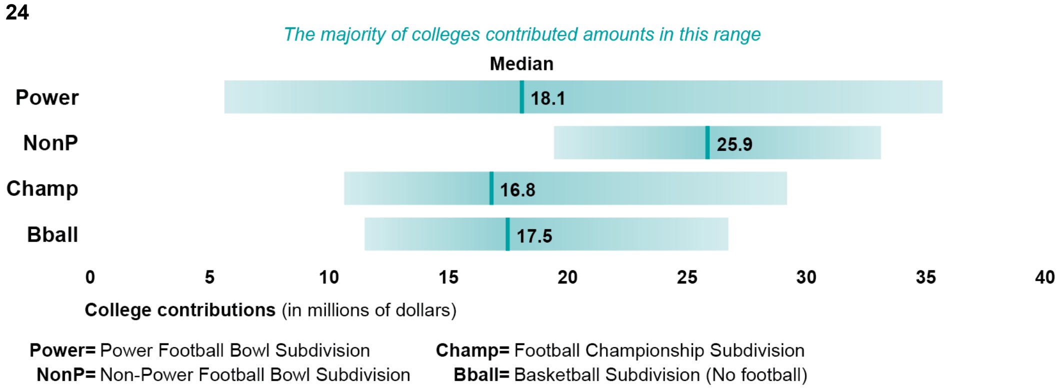
According to a representative of a stakeholder group representing college athletics staff, athletics programs have pursued additional efforts to generate revenue to pay for increasing athletic expenses. However, they said they expect the gap between expenses and generated revenue to continue increasing with new developments, such as the introduction of college revenue sharing with student-athletes in the 2025–26 academic year.

How much funding did DI colleges contribute to pay for athletics programs' expenses in academic years 2023–24 and 2014–15?

As generated revenue generally did not cover program expenses, most DI colleges across all subdivisions reported contributing substantial funding to support their athletics programs. These college contributions are funded by tuition and fees paid by students, as well as other unrestricted funds from the college. College contributions also can include federal funds that students receive in federal student aid which is often used to pay their tuition and fees.

In the 2023–24 academic year, 337 of the 352 DI athletics programs (96 percent) received a combined $7.2 billion in college contributions. Three subdivisions received a similar median amount of college contributions, ranging from $16.8 million for Championship to 18.1 million for Power. The median for the Non-Power subdivision was larger at $25.9 million (see fig. 7). In addition, the top 20 percent of programs in each subdivision received amounts that ranged from at least $26.7 million for Basketball colleges to at least $35.7 million for Power colleges.

Figure 7: Typical Amount Colleges Contributed to Division I Athletics Programs, Academic Year 2023–24



Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

Notes: This analysis is based on the 337 out of 352 colleges that reported college contributions for their athletics programs. The horizontal bars represent the middle 60 percent of these colleges in terms of the amounts contributed to their Division I athletics programs within each subdivision. This range minimizes the influence of outliers and reflects typical values. The vertical lines represent the median values. The medians shown reflect the middle value across these colleges in each Division I subdivision. For the purposes of this report, GAO analyzed data on the Football Bowl Subdivision Power and Non-Power conferences and the Championship and Basketball subdivisions (referring to each as subdivisions).

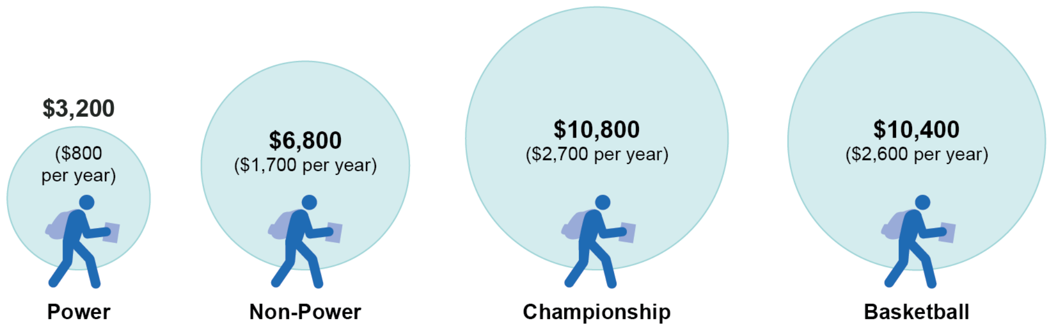
College contributions were the primary source of funding used to support athletics programs in the Non-Power, Championship, and Basketball subdivisions. In the 2023–24 academic year, college contributions accounted for 52 percent ($1.6 billion), 69 percent ($2.5 billion), and 76 percent ($1.8 billion) of total athletics revenue in these subdivisions, respectively. These percentages were largely consistent with those a decade earlier, though total dollar amounts increased over that period.[22]

Because Power athletics programs generated most of their revenue, college contributions accounted for a lower percentage of overall funding for these programs compared to athletics programs in other subdivisions. However, total college contributions to Power athletics programs increased from $445 million in the 2014–15 academic year to $1.2 billion in the 2023–24 academic year—nearly tripling. The share of total revenue from college contributions also rose from 7 percent to 11 percent.

College contributions per undergraduate student (athletes and non-athletes) varied across DI subdivisions, among the 337 colleges that contributed general funds to their athletics programs.[23] In the 2023–24 academic year, Championship and Basketball subdivisions had the highest median amounts. Multiplied over the course of a four-year degree, we estimated the median DI college contribution per undergraduate student was about $8,500—ranging from $3,200 for a Power college to $10,800 for a Championship college (see fig. 8).[24]

Figure 8: Estimated Median College Contributions Per Undergraduate Student Over 4 Years for Division I Athletics Programs

Funds colleges contribute to athletics programs may come from student tuition and fees or other unrestricted general funds.
Amounts shown are illustrative estimates and do not reflect actual student payments to athletics programs



Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

Note: This analysis is based on the 337 out of the 352 colleges that reported college contributions for their athletics program. The median values shown reflect the middle value across these colleges in each Division I subdivision. The estimate is based on the median college contributions divided by the number of undergraduate students (athletes and non-athletes) in each subdivision for the 2023–24 academic year, multiplied by four to approximate a 4-year undergraduate degree. The median college contributions per undergraduate student were rounded to the nearest $50 dollars. For the purposes of this report, GAO analyzed data on the Football Bowl Subdivision Power and Non-Power conferences and the Championship and Basketball subdivisions (referring to each as subdivisions).

Student Fees. Whether or not a college collects student fees for athletics varies among colleges (see text box). In the 2023–24 academic year, 87 percent of Non-Power colleges used student fees to partially fund their athletics programs, compared to 64 percent of Championship colleges, 55 percent of Basketball colleges, and 48 percent of Power colleges. Among colleges that fund athletics in part from student fees, the median amount per undergraduate student was $125 for Power, $550 for Non-Power, $475 for Championship, and $425 for Basketball in student fees for that single year.[25]

Factors that Contribute to Tuition and Fee Setting

The general student body of a college contributes to funding athletics programs through both the tuition it pays to the college and the fees the college charges students, which may or may not be specifically labeled as “athletics” fees. Decisions around how colleges set tuition and fee amounts—including decisions about whether to charge an “athletics” fee or use funds from general student fees to fund athletics—can be complex and multifaceted.

Colleges may have different philosophies or strategies for how to set tuition and whether and how to charge fees. In addition, factors outside of the control of a college’s administration can affect how it sets tuition and fees. For example, for a public college, the amount of tuition it charges each year may be set or limited by the state legislature or a coordinating governing agency, rather than the college itself.

A 2023 report released by the State Higher Education Executing Officers Association found that college presidents or boards typically have more discretion to set student fees than they do to set tuition. With this in mind, a public college with less flexibility to increase tuition may choose to set higher student fees. Alternatively, a college with more flexibility to increase tuition may keep student fees low.

Source: GAO analysis of research on how colleges are funded, including: Colorado, J., Laderman, S., & McCoy-Simmons, C. (2023). State tuition, fees, and financial assistance policies 2022. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. | GAO-26-108640

What portion of DI athletics programs' funding came from direct state or other government funding in academic years 2023–24 and 2014–15?

Direct state or other government funding set aside for athletics comprised a small portion of reported DI revenue in the 2023–24 and 2014–15 academic years.

- In the 2023–24 academic year, 62 of the 352 DI colleges reported that they received direct state or other government funding—a slight increase from the 44 of 346 DI colleges a decade earlier.[26]
- Among the DI colleges, Non-Power colleges received the largest amounts of direct state or other government funding in both the 2014–15 and 2023–24 academic years (3 percent and 4 percent, respectively). For each of the other DI subdivisions, direct state or other government funding comprised up to 1 percent of total revenue in both academic years.

Direct state or other government funding could include federal funds, such as work study for student positions in the athletics department, according to NCAA guidance and officials. As noted earlier, federal funds from federal student aid can also reach athletics programs indirectly through tuition and student fees included under college contributions.[27]

How has the amount of revenue generated by DII college athletics programs compared to spending and how have they funded their programs?

All DII athletics programs reported spending more than the revenue they generated in both the 2023–24 and 2014–15 academic years. They relied mostly on college contributions to cover their expenses, about one-third of which went to scholarships for student-athletes.

Spending. The 297 DII colleges reported spending a total of $2.7 billion on athletics in the 2023–24 academic year, a 44 percent increase from a decade earlier when 305 DII colleges spent $1.9 billion.

- The median DII athletics program spent $8.5 million in the 2023–24 academic year, nearly 50 percent more than a decade earlier ($5.7 million). Median spending increased during this period, by 66 percent for DII colleges without football and 41 percent for DII colleges with football.
- DII college athletics programs spent the most—about one-third of total operating expenses—on athletics scholarships in the 2023–24 academic year. DII colleges may have more incentive to offer athletics scholarships to maintain adequate enrollment numbers in the overall student body, according to representatives of one stakeholder group representing college athletics staff.
- Athletic scholarship spending was followed by compensation for coaches (19 percent), team and game expenses (19 percent), and compensation for other athletics staff (12 percent).[28] These shares were generally consistent for both DII Football and Non-Football colleges. Further, these shares were similar to those a decade earlier.

Generated revenue. Revenue generated by DII college athletics programs covered a small portion of their expenses. In the 2023–24 academic year, DII athletics programs generated 14 percent of their total funding for athletics. Generated revenue represented a slightly higher share of total athletics funding at DII Football colleges (16 percent) compared to Non-Football (11 percent).

- DII athletics programs generated a total of $365.2 million in the 2023–24 academic year, an increase of 61 percent from the 2014–15 academic year, when DII programs generated $227.6 million.
- During this same period, the median amount of revenue generated by DII athletics programs rose from $504,500 to $900,000. DII Football colleges

generated twice the revenue of Non-Football colleges in the 2023–24 academic year (at the median, $1.2 million and $611,000, respectively).

- Athletics donations comprised the largest share of revenue generated by DII programs (approximately 40 percent) in both the 2014–15 and 2023–24 academic years. Ticket sales and other game day revenues made up the second largest share of generated revenue (14 percent), followed by revenue from sports camps (12 percent), in the 2023–24 academic year.[29] These shares were similar in the 2014–15 academic year.

Spending compared to generated revenue. All DII athletics programs reported spending more than they generated in both the 2023–24 and 2014–15 academic years.

- The median gap between spending and generated revenue was $7.4 million in the 2023–24 academic year, up from $4.8 million a decade earlier.
- The 20 percent of DII colleges with the largest gap between spending and generated revenue spent at least $10.7 million more than they generated in the 2023–24 academic year. At the other end of the spectrum, the 20 percent of DII colleges with the smallest gap had a gap of $4.9 million or less.

College contributions. As generated revenue did not cover program expenses, DII athletics programs relied on college contributions for most of their funding, or about 85 percent in the 2023–24 academic year.[30] College contributions are funded by tuition and fees paid by students (which may include federal student aid), as well as other unrestricted funds from the college.

- That year, DII colleges contributed $2.3 billion to cover their athletics program spending. The median DII college contribution was about $7 million, while 20 percent of DII colleges contributed over $10.8 million to their athletics programs.
- At the median across DII Football and Non-Football colleges, college contributions amounted to about $2,850 per undergraduate student enrolled (athletes and non-athletes)—amounting to about $11,350 per student over 4 years.[31]

Direct state or other government funding. Direct state or other government funding accounted for 1 percent of total funding for DII athletics programs, and just 25 of the 297 DII colleges reported receiving any direct state or other government funding.[32] However, for a small number of colleges (five of those 25), this funding made up at least 38 percent of their total athletics funding.

How sizable were debts and endowments held by DI and DII college athletics programs in academic year 2023–24?

In the 2023–24 academic year, the percentage of colleges that reported holding athletics debt and the amount of that debt varied widely across divisions and subdivisions. In addition, while athletics endowments were more common, the value of endowments also varied widely.

Division I athletics debt. Athletics debt is accumulated over time, such as from taking out loans from the college or other sources to cover annual deficits (see text box). This debt includes principal and interest that would need to be repaid over time.

Deficits and Debt in College Athletics Programs

The majority of Division I and Division II college athletics programs receive enough funding from college contributions, direct government support, and revenue generated by athletics to cover program expenses. However, when a college athletics program is unable to cover all its spending through these funding sources, the program has an annual deficit. A college may use loans, from the college or an external source, to finance its program, resulting in athletics debt.

In the 2023–24 academic year, 20 percent of Division I athletics programs (about 70 colleges) had annual deficits of over $1.4 million. In the same academic year, 20 percent of Division II athletics programs (about 59 colleges) had annual deficits of over $377,000.

Source: GAO analysis of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership financial data. | GAO-26-108640

About 72 percent of DI colleges reported athletics debt in the 2023–24 academic year; however, this varied by subdivision. Nearly all Power colleges reported athletics debt (96 percent) compared to smaller percentages of colleges in Non-Power (84 percent), Championship (63 percent), and Basketball subdivisions (60 percent).

For colleges reporting athletics debt, Power colleges also reported the largest debt value across DI subdivisions.[33] The median value of athletics debt for these 66 Power colleges was $120.3 million, with 80 percent, or roughly 53 Power colleges having athletics debt of at least $86.3 million. Further, 20 percent of Power colleges had debt of $219.6 million or more. The median value of the athletics debt held by Power colleges was substantially greater than that of the three other DI subdivisions ($21 million for Non-Power, $8.6 million for Championship, and $5.5 million for Basketball).

Division I athletics endowments. In the 2023–24 academic year, most DI colleges had endowments specifically dedicated to athletics (92 percent) but the Power colleges' athletics endowments were substantially larger than those of other DI colleges.[34] For those colleges reporting athletics endowments, the median for Power colleges was $63.8 million, compared to $7.3 million for Non-Power colleges, $4.9 million for Championship, and $2.9 million for Basketball.

Within the Power subdivision, there was wide variation in the value of athletics endowments. The 20 percent of colleges with the largest endowments all had values over $145.3 million, while the 20 percent of colleges with the smallest endowments had values of $23.0 million or less.

Division II athletics debt. In the 2023–24 academic year, the percentage of DII colleges reporting athletics debt (37 percent) was lower than DI colleges, but this varied by subdivision. A larger percentage of DII Football colleges reported athletics debt (45 percent) than Non-Football colleges (29 percent). For those reporting athletics debt, the median debt value was $2.3 million, while 20 percent held over $8.4 million in debt.

Division II athletics endowments. Fewer DII colleges than DI colleges had endowments dedicated to athletics (69 percent versus 92 percent). A higher percentage of DII Football colleges (72 percent) than Non-Football colleges (66 percent) had athletics endowments. For those DII colleges with athletics endowments, the median was $1.2 million. However, the median value for DII Football colleges ($1.7 million) was more than twice that of Non-Football ($705,000).

How GAO Did This Study

We reviewed data from the NCAA's membership financial database for academic years 2014–2015, 2018–2019, and 2023–2024. Through a data sharing agreement with the NCAA, we obtained aggregated DI and DII data from this system. Division III colleges do not provide athletics scholarships and are not included in the scope of this report.

The NCAA provided data pursuant to our request but otherwise had no role in the development of this report; the findings and conclusions are GAO's alone. We provided a draft of the report to NCAA for technical review and incorporated technical comments as appropriate.

We obtained aggregated data that included financial data for all NCAA member DI and DII athletics programs, both public and private colleges. Specifically, we obtained data aggregated by division (DI and DII) and each subdivision within the two divisions, as well as quintiles within each of these groups. The NCAA requires all its members (i.e., colleges) to submit their financial data detailing operating revenues, expenses, and capital relating to their intercollegiate athletics programs. NCAA requires DI colleges to submit their financial data to NCAA annually. NCAA requires DII colleges to submit their data every 3 years but most report annually, according to NCAA officials. According to the NCAA data we analyzed, 100 percent of DI colleges submitted financial data in all 3 academic years, and 95 percent, 99 percent, and 97 percent of DII colleges submitted financial data in academic years 2023–24, 2018–19, and 2014–15, respectively. Although 100 percent of DII colleges did not report data for the years we analyzed, we determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting aggregated financial data on DII college athletics programs.

We obtained these data for 3 selected academic years—2014–2015, 2018–2019, and 2023–2024 (the most recent available at the time of our analysis)—to allow us to analyze points in time over a 10-year period. To make historical comparisons, we compare academic year 2023–2024 to a decade earlier, academic year 2014–15. These data contained revenue and expense variables. Some of the variables, such as football bowl revenue and student meals, were not collected in the 2014–15 academic year, and so we were unable to compare points in time for those variables. We report nominal numbers, instead of inflation-adjusted numbers, to ensure consistency between our reported numbers and other publicly reported numbers. However, to account for inflation during this time period, we report the inflation rate and also show the inflation rate when providing spending data over time in a graphic. Between the 2014–15 and 2023–24 academic years, inflation was 31 percent using the Consumer Price Index.

The data collected by the NCAA are self-reported by its member colleges. The NCAA requires member institutions to have their financial reports audited by an independent accountant (annually for DI colleges and every 3 years for DII colleges), but the NCAA does not audit the data. We assessed the reliability of these data by reviewing the data and related documentation, interviewing NCAA officials responsible for maintaining the data, and conducting electronic testing to check for errors. We determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting aggregated financial data on DI and DII college athletics programs.

To gather context about the finances of college athletics programs, including differences in spending and revenue across divisions and subdivisions, we interviewed representatives of four national stakeholder organizations. We selected organizations to obtain a range of perspectives from entities representing college personnel who may play a role in athletics finances, including athletics business managers, athletics directors, college business officers, and other higher education officials.

We conducted this performance audit from July 2025 to July 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Tim Walberg
Chairman
Committee on Education and Workforce
House of Representatives

GAO Contact Information

For more information, contact: Melissa Emrey-Arras, Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security, emeryarrasm@gao.gov.

Media Relations: Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, Media@gao.gov.

Congressional Relations: David A. Powner, Acting Managing Director, CongRel@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments: Michael Kniss (Assistant Director), Cady S. Panetta (Analyst in Charge), James Bennett, Kathleen Bever, Janelle Ikard, Aaron Olszewski, Meg Sommerfeld, and Andrew Stavisky. Other contributors were Carl Barden, Xiang Bi, Aimee Elivert, and Gina Hoover.

Endnotes

[1]The NCAA provided data pursuant to our request but otherwise had no role in the development of this report; the findings and conclusions are GAO's alone. The scope of this report is on intercollegiate athletics and does not include club or intramural athletics. The NCAA is a voluntary, self-governing organization of 4-year colleges, universities, and conferences.

[2]Each division has the independent authority to organize itself, including setting its own governing structure and setting standards for academic eligibility.

[3]Currently, four conferences are considered the Power conferences: the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference. However, prior to August 2024, the PAC-12 was also a Power conference.

[4]We combined several expense variables as "team and game expenses" in our analysis of expenses for the 2023–24 academic year. For Division I (DI) as a whole, team travel was the largest of these expenses (7 percent of total program expenses), followed by game expenses (4 percent), sports equipment, uniforms, and supplies (3 percent), and student-athlete meals (2 percent). Guarantees, medical expenses and insurance, and spirit groups each made up less than 2 percent. Guarantees are amounts paid to visiting participating institutions, including per diems and/or travel and meal expenses and payments made due to game cancellations.

[5]The “facilities” expense category is defined as debt service payments, leases and rental fees for athletics facilities. The definition does not include facilities maintenance and operations expenses such as utilities or equipment repair.

[6]In the Championship subdivision, the highest total athletics spending of any college was $77.1 million, and in the Basketball subdivision it was $59.9 million. In the Non-Power subdivision, the top 20 percent of colleges (roughly 12 colleges) spent between $66.3 million and $133.2 million.

[7]The “coaching” expense category is defined as compensation, bonuses, and benefits paid by the university and related entities to all coaches, and the “support staff” category included the same expenses for all administrative and support staff. Expenses related to severance are included in a separate category.

[8]The minimum spent by a college in the Power subdivision on coaching was $14.5 million, which was more than the maximum college spent in the Basketball subdivision ($10.8 million), and more than at least 80 percent of Non-Power and Championship colleges ($12.1 million and $7.2 million at the 80th percentile, respectively).

[9]In academic year 2023–24, Non-Power colleges spent a median of $8.7 million on athletics scholarships, Championship colleges spent a median of $6.1 million, and Basketball colleges spent a median of $5.9 million.

[10]The colleges with the top 20 percent of spending on athletics scholarships at the Non-Power, Championship, and Basketball levels spent over $11.2 million, $10.9 million, and $8.4 million, respectively in the 2023–24 academic year.

[11]We report using nominal numbers, instead of inflation adjusted numbers, to ensure consistency between our reported numbers and other publicly reported numbers. To account for inflation during this time period, we report the inflation rate here and also show the inflation rate when providing spending data over time in a graphic.

[12]For purposes of member financial reporting, the NCAA defines the “recruiting” expense as “transportation, lodging and meals for prospective student-athletes and institutional personnel on official and unofficial visits, telephone call charges, postage, and such.”

[13]We use the term “college contributions” to refer to the combined NCAA categories institutional support and student fees that go directly to the athletics program.

[14]Unrestricted funds can include student tuition and fees, investment earnings, state appropriations, income from auxiliary programs, and other funding sources.

[15]The maximum amount of generated revenue was $67.6 million for Non-Power, $68.8 million for Championship, and $31.6 million for Basketball subdivisions in the 2023–24 academic year.

[16]Media rights revenue includes all revenue received for radio, television, internet, digital and e-commerce rights, including the portion of conference distributions related to media rights, if applicable.

[17]Game day revenue includes revenue from ticket sales, guarantees, and novelty merchandise, parking, and concession sales. Donations are made directly to athletics programs from individuals, corporations, associations, foundations, and booster organizations.

[18]We use the term spending gap to describe when athletics program expenses exceed generated revenue. This is also known as negative net generated revenue.

[19]The top 20 percent of colleges in the Championship, Basketball, and Non-Power subdivisions spent at least $28.8 million, $26.7 million, and $38.2 million, respectively, more than the revenue they generated.

[20]Across the Non-Power, Championship, and Basketball subdivisions, all but one college athletics program spent more than it generated in revenue in academic year 2014–15, and all but two spent more than they generated in revenue in academic year 2023–24.

[21]At the median, from the 2014–15 to 2023–24 academic years, for Championship college athletics programs, expenses increased 58 percent while revenue grew 50 percent; for Basketball colleges, expenses increased 51 percent while revenue grew 35 percent; and for Non-Power colleges, expenses increased 53 percent while revenue grew 38 percent.

[22]In the 2014–15 academic year, as a share of total revenue in the subdivision, college contributions made up 50 percent in Non-Power, 70 percent in Championship, and 76 percent in Basketball.

[23]We calculated these estimates based on the median college contributions divided by the number of undergraduate students (athletes and non-athletes) in each subdivision for the 2023–24 academic year, multiplied by four to approximate a 4-year undergraduate degree. These amounts are illustrative estimates and do not reflect actual student payments to athletic programs.

[24]For the 20 percent of athletics programs in each subdivision where college contributions per student were highest, contributions ranged from $2,050 per undergraduate student per year for Power colleges to over $6,600 for Championship colleges. Over the course of 4 years, we estimated these college contributions per undergraduate student to range from $8,200 for Power colleges to $26,400 for Championship colleges, respectively. These amounts are illustrative estimates and do not reflect actual student payments to athletics programs.

[25]The median student fee amounts per undergraduate student were rounded to the nearest $25 dollars. Between the 2014–15 and 2023–24 academic years, median student fee revenue per undergraduate student increased slightly across subdivisions. Basketball and Non-Power colleges saw the largest increase at about 30 percent. The fee revenue per undergraduate student at Championship colleges increased 14 percent and at Power colleges remained essentially unchanged.

[26]In academic year 2023–24, nine Power, 15 Non-Power, 25 Championship, and 13 Basketball colleges reported that they received direct government funding for athletics.

[27]NCAA does not specifically track federal funds that may fall under the reporting category Direct State and Other Government Funding.

[28]We combined several expense variables as "team and game expenses" in our analysis. For DII as a whole in the 2023–24 academic year, team travel was the largest of these expenses (9 percent of total program expenses), followed by equipment, uniforms and supplies (4 percent). Game expenses accounted for 2 percent, and medical expenses and insurance made up 1.5 percent. Spirit groups, meals, and guarantees each made up 1 percent or less.

[29]"Other Operating Revenue," a variable on NCAA financial reports, accounted for 11.4 percent of DII athletics generated revenue in the 2023–24 academic year. According to NCAA, "other operating revenue" is any operating revenues received by athletics that is not classified under any other categories.

[30]Student fees accounted for about 9 percent of total athletics revenue for DII athletics programs in the 2023–24 academic year, and other college contributions from general funds including tuition, accounted for 76 percent. That year, 53 percent of DII athletics programs reported using funding contributed by the college from student fees—a larger percentage of DII Football colleges (64 percent) compared to Non-Football (41 percent).

[31]This analysis is based on the 295 out of 297 DII colleges that reported college contributions for their athletics program. The estimate is based on the median college contributions divided by the number of undergraduate students (athletes and non-athletes) for the 2023–24 academic year, multiplied by four to approximate a 4-year undergraduate degree. The median college contributions per undergraduate student were rounded to the nearest $50 dollars. College contributions are funds from the college provided to the athletics program, which may come from tuition, fees, and other unrestricted general funds. The amounts shown are illustrative estimates and do not reflect actual student payments to athletics programs.

[32]In addition to revenue generated by the college athletics programs and funding from college contributions, college athletics programs receive some government funding restricted for athletics. In the 2023–24 academic year, about 8.4 percent of DII athletics programs received direct state and other government funding and of the schools that did receive this funding, the median was about $368,900. In terms of federal government funding, college contributions include indirect federal funds from federal student aid that students use to pay their tuition and fees. Direct state and other government funding, according to NCAA's definition of the reporting category, could include federal funds, such as work study, but this is not specifically tracked in the data.

[33]Member colleges report to the NCAA the total value athletics related debt held at the end of the reporting year.

[34] Member colleges report to the NCAA the total fair market value of athletics dedicated endowments at the end of the reporting year.