



# The Economic Impact of Badger Football's Declining Performance\*

Junjie Guo

Research Economist

Center for Research on the Wisconsin Economy

University of Wisconsin – Madison

Ananth Seshadri

Mary Sue and Mike Shannon Distinguished Chair

Director, Center for Research on the Wisconsin Economy

University of Wisconsin – Madison

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The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Badger Football program serves as a critical revenue engine for the Athletics Department, generating roughly \$60 million in annual profits. Yet, its on-field performance has declined sharply, with winning percentages plummeting from over 90% in 2017 to below 50% in 2024—the program's worst record since 2001. If the poor performance persists, it could reduce the program's profit by around \$20 million per year, threatening other subsidized sports, alumni donations, student applications, research output, and the university's overall ranking. Wider economic fallout includes an estimated \$160 million annual loss in Madison and \$280 million statewide, stemming from reduced attendance, game-day spending, tourism, and reputational value. Revitalizing the program requires targeted investments in both physical capital (e.g., facilities) and human capital (e.g., recruiting budgets, NIL deals, and compensation for players and coaches).

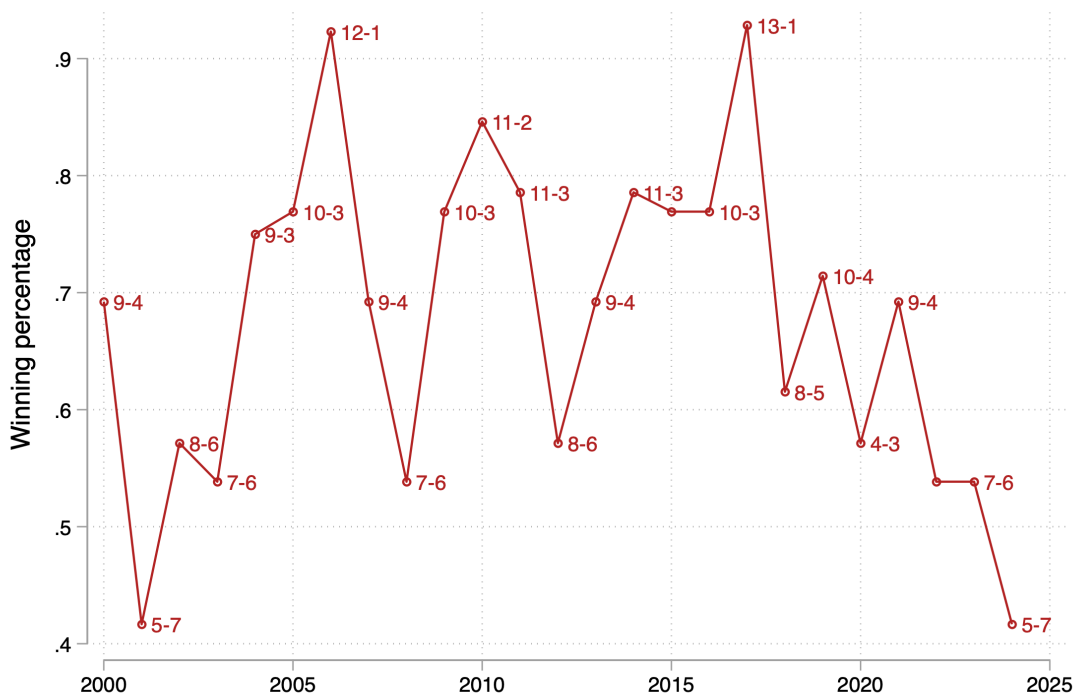
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\*The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Center for Research on the Wisconsin Economy, the Department of Economics, or the University of Wisconsin – Madison.

## Executive Summary

- **Historical Role and Recent Decline:** Badger Football has historically been a cornerstone of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Athletics Department, yielding about \$60 million in annual profits. However, its performance on the field has deteriorated dramatically, with winning percentages falling from over 90% in 2017 to below 50% in 2024—the lowest since 2001. The 2025 season is on track to be the program's worst this century, marked by shutout losses and failures against ranked opponents, signaling a deepening crisis.
- **Financial Repercussions for UW Athletics:** Persistent poor performance threatens to cut football profits by \$20 million annually—roughly one-third of current levels—endangering subsidies for other sports and straining the department's overall operations, as evidenced by declining attendance and season ticket sales.
- **University-Wide Ramifications:** Beyond athletics, Badger Football's declining performance could erode alumni donations, diminish the volume and quality of student applications, reduce research expenditures and outputs, and further depress the university's ranking amid existing pressures like federal funding cuts and declining international enrollment.
- **Economic Ripple Effects:** The downturn may shrink economic activity in Madison by \$160 million and statewide by \$280 million each year, driven by lower game attendance, reduced visitor spending, decreased tourism, diminished merchandise sales, and weakened reputational benefits for the university and Wisconsin as a whole.
- **Path Forward:** Reinvigorating Badger Football is beneficial to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the city of Madison, and the state of Wisconsin. This requires strategic investments exploiting complementarities between physical capital, e.g., upgraded facilities, and human capital, e.g., enhanced recruiting and competitive Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) spending and compensation for players and coaches.

The performance of Badger Football has declined significantly over the last few years. Figure 1 shows that the team’s winning percentage dropped from over 90% in 2017 to below 50% in 2024, the worst record since 2001. During the same period, the team’s record against Big Ten opponents dropped from 9-0 in 2017 to 3-6 in 2024. Badger Football failed to make a bowl game in 2024, the first miss since 2001. The current season is even worse. After winning the first two games, Badger Football has lost five straight games and is 0-4 in the Big Ten. In the last two weeks, Badgers first lost to Iowa on homecoming by a score of 37-0, their first home shutout since 1980 and ninth straight loss to a power conference program (Dochterman, 2025), and then lost to Ohio State by a score of 34-0. This is the first time they were scoreless in back-to-back weeks since 1977 (Borba, 2025). With two of the remaining five opponents in AP Top 25 (Indiana in the 3rd place and Oregon in 8th), Badger Football will very likely end this season with the worst record in this century.



**Figure 1:** Performance of Badger Football: 2000–2024

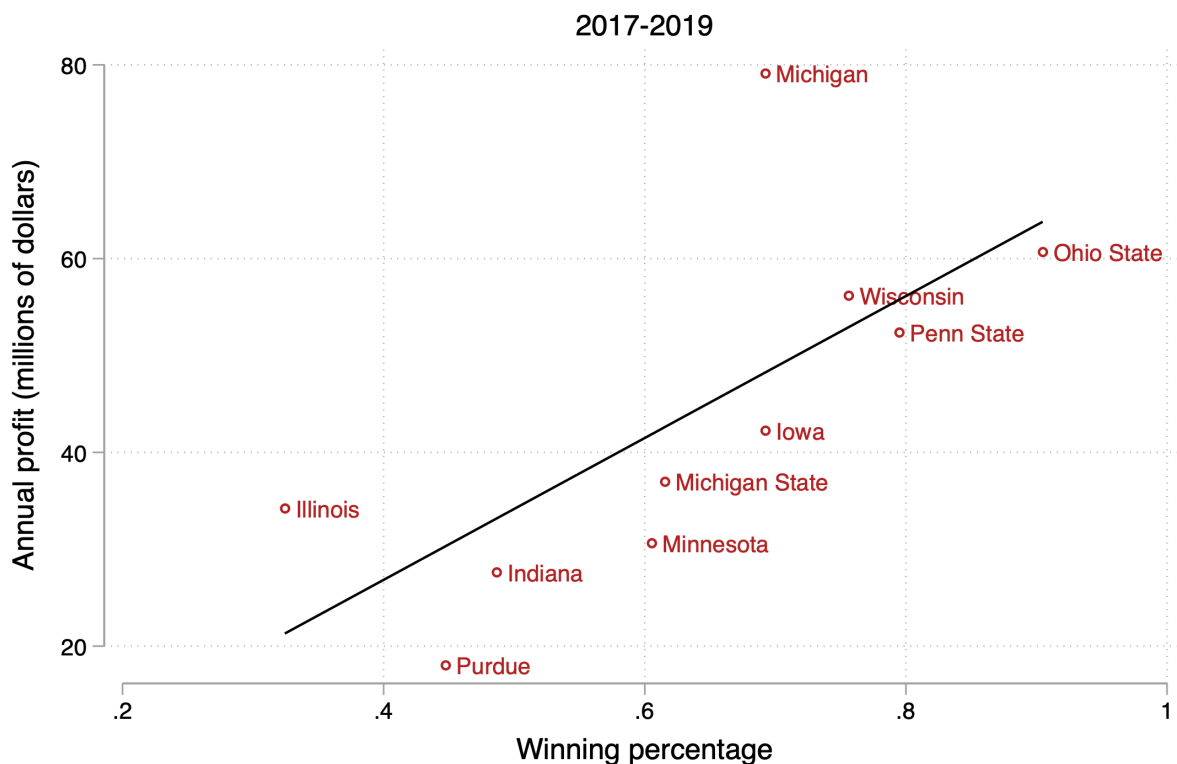
This paper shows that the declining performance could have a negative impact on the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the local and state economy.

## 1 Impact on University of Wisconsin-Madison

Badger Football has long been the cornerstone of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Athletics Department, driving significant economic activity through ticket and merchandise sales, game-day spending, and broader reputational benefits. According to the U.S.

Department of Education’s Equity in Athletics Data Analysis (EADA), in 2023, UW Athletics Department’s total revenues from and total expenditures on the football team were \$106,732,837 and \$42,297,448, respectively. This means that UW Athletics Department made a profit of over \$64 million from Badger Football in 2023.

The profit of a university’s football team is strongly related to its performance on the field. Figure 2 plots the average annual profit and winning percentage of selected Big Ten football teams in 2017–2019, the three years before the pandemic when there was no significant change in the Big Ten conference and its media contract.<sup>†</sup> The fitted line suggests that Badger Football’s annual profit could drop by about \$20 million if the team’s winning percentage falls permanently from around 80% to around 50%.

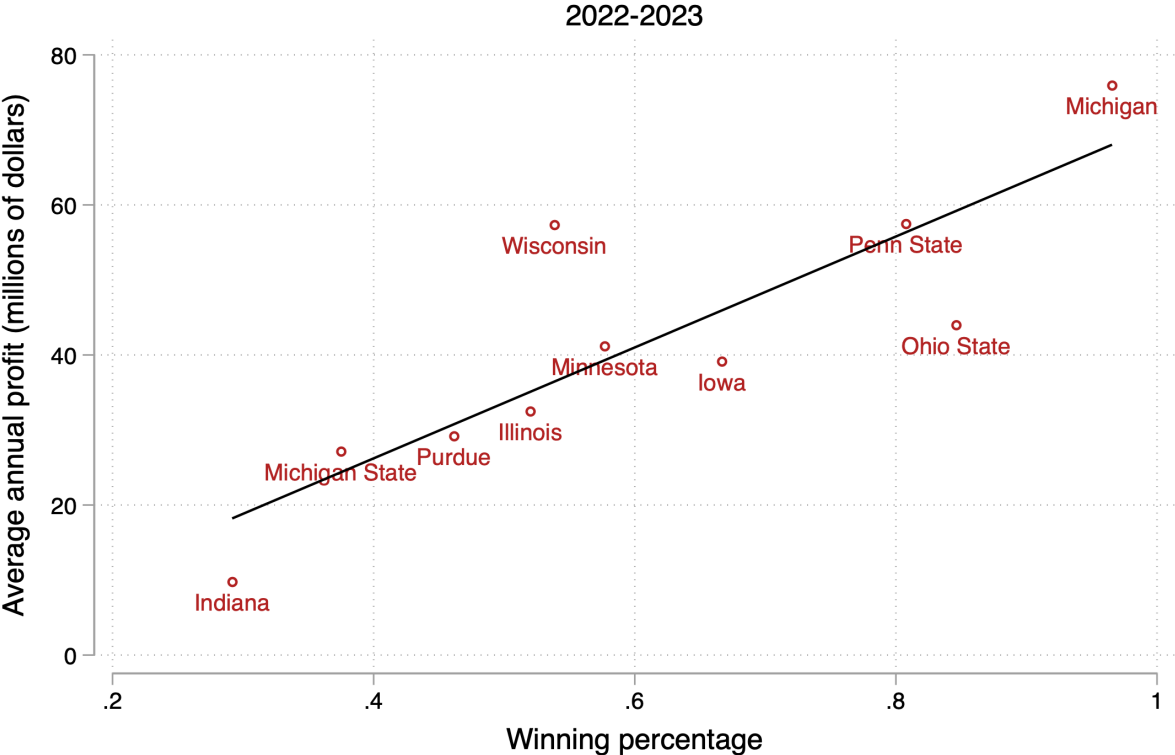


**Figure 2:** Performance and profit of selected Big Ten football teams: 2017–2019

Figure 3 plots similar data for 2022-2023, the last two years when each team’s profit could be calculated from EADA. Wisconsin is significantly above the fitted line. This suggests that, by 2023, Badger Football’s profit had not dropped in proportion to its performance on the field. This is probably because there was a lot of excitement about the hiring of Luke

<sup>†</sup>Before its current 7-year media contract started in 2023, Big Ten had a 10-year media contract in 2007-2017 and a 6-year contract in 2017-2023. There was no change in Big Ten’s membership between 2014 (Maryland and Rutgers) and 2024 (UCLA, USC, Oregon and Washington). See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big\\_Ten\\_Conference#Member\\_universities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Ten_Conference#Member_universities).

Fickell as the head coach in 2022. For example, former Wisconsin athletic director Barry Alvarez called it “a home run hire” (Chavkin, 2022), and ESPN claimed that “[t]he hiring of Fickell marks one of the most eye-opening moves of the college football carousel, with Wisconsin luring the country’s top Group of 5 coach who brings vast experience in the Big Ten’s Midwestern footprint” (Thamel, 2022).



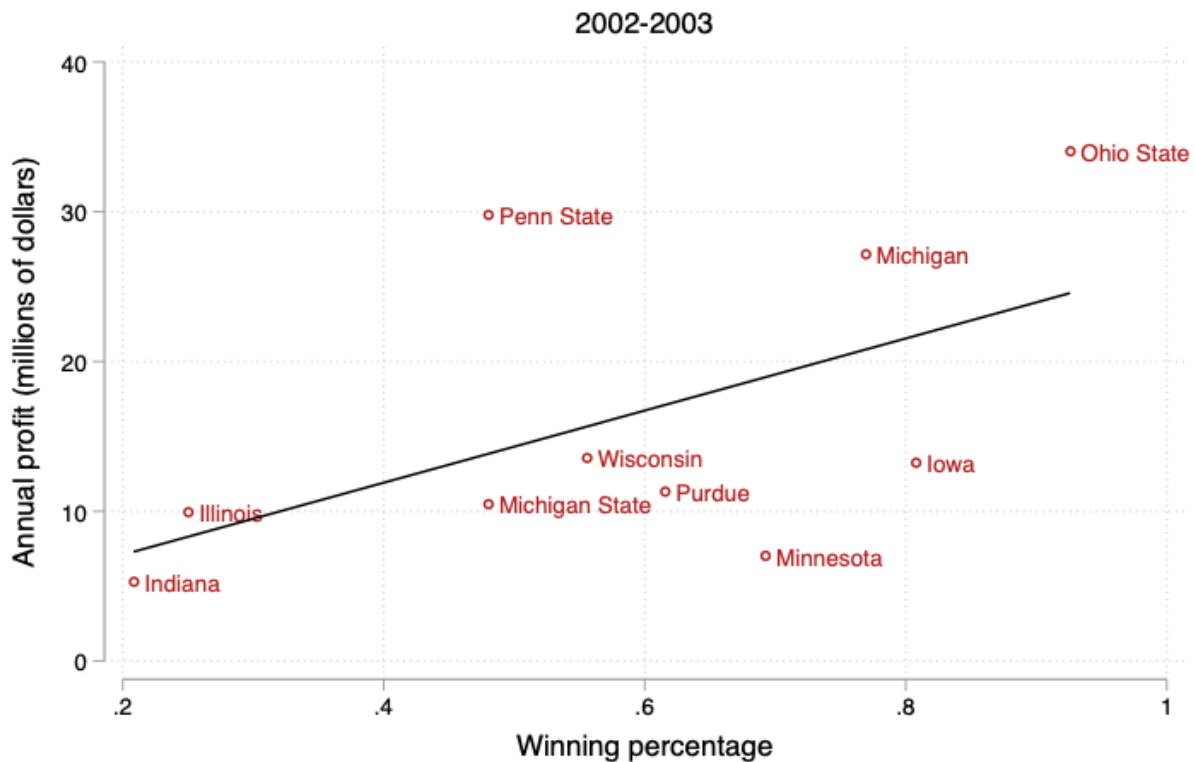
**Figure 3:** Performance and profit of selected Big Ten football teams: 2022–2023

If the team’s poor performance on the field continues, Wisconsin would probably move toward Minnesota and Illinois on the graph, and its annual profit could drop by about \$20 million, which is about one third of the current profit of about \$60 million.

Recent data suggest that the decline has already started. Milewski (2025) reports that the announced attendance for this season’s opener was the lowest for a first home game of a season since 1992, and the average from the first two games was down 10% from the same window of the 2024 season. A drop in season ticket sales appears to be a primary reason for the change. Badgers sold 38,082 season tickets for general seating areas in 2025, down from 42,197 in 2024 and 41,206 in 2023.

For more evidence, Figure 4 plots similar data for 2002–2003, the first two years when EADA data are available and the last time Badger Football’s winning percentage was below 60% in two consecutive years (see Figure 1). Consistent with its performance on

the field, Badger Football's profit was close to the median of its peers in the two years. Although the data are noisier, Wisconsin is again close to the fitted line.



**Figure 4:** Performance and profit of selected Big Ten football teams: 2002–2003

Taken together, Figures 2 and 4 suggest that Badger Football's profit moves with its performance on the field. The same is true for other football teams. For example, in 2002-2003, Purdue's football team was close to Badger Football in both profit and winning percentage. However, in 2017-2019, Badger Football was among the best in both measures and Purdue was among the worst. This suggests that neither team is special when it comes to the relationship between performance and profit, and Badger Football's declining performance could reduce its profit significantly.

A smaller profit from football would have a negative impact on other programs and operations at UW Athletics Department. While the department made a profit of over \$64 million from Badger Football in 2023, the total profit (total revenues minus total expenditures) from all programs in the department was less than \$11 million. This suggests that the department's other programs and operations are subsidized heavily by the football team.

Badger Football's declining performance could also have a negative impact on non-athletic activities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

- First, it could reduce **alumni donations** to the university. Using detailed information about donations made by alumni of a selective research university, Meer and Rosen (2009) find that, when a male graduate's former team wins its conference championship, his donations for general purposes increase by about 7% and his donations to the athletic program increase by about the same percentage. Moreover, if a male alumnus's team won its conference championship during his senior year, his subsequent giving to the athletic program is about 8% a year higher. In comparison, the effects for women are generally small and statistically insignificant.

*Badger Football often serves as an entry point for alumni and other boosters to support the University of Wisconsin-Madison through charitable contributions. It also provides multiple points of engagement for current and prospective donors, further strengthening the university's donor base and financial position (Econsult Solutions, Inc, 2022). However, it has been 13 years since Badger Football won the Big Ten championship in 2012. If the poor performance continues, its impact on alumni donations and engagement is likely to diminish. This would be an additional challenge for the university as it faces significant funding cuts from the federal government and declining enrollment for international students who pay higher tuition than in-state students (Huynh, 2025).*

- Second, it could reduce the quantity and quality of **student applications**. Pope and Pope (2009) find that, if a university's football team is ranked in the top 20 in the AP College Football Poll by the end of a season, applications to the university would increase by about 2.5% in the next year. Ending in the top 10 yields a 3% increase, and winning a football championship yields a 7-8% increase. Moreover, schools tend to exploit the increases in applications by improving both the number and the quality of incoming students.

*From 2010–2019, Badger Football was ranked in the top 10 at the end of three seasons (7th in 2010 and 2017, and 6th in 2016) and top 20 for two more seasons (13th in 2014 and 11th in 2019). It has not been ranked in the top 25 since 2019. This decline could have a negative effect on the quantity and quality of student applications to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This would be a challenge for the university as its international freshman enrollment declined by over 30% (Huynh, 2025).*

- Third, it could reduce the university's **research expenditures and output**. Tabakovic and Wollmann (2019) use the difference between postseason and preseason votes received by a university's football team in the AP Top 25 Poll as a measure of the team's unexpected success in a season. They find that unexpected success of a university's football team in one year has a positive effect on the university's research expenditures in the next year. This suggests that a football team's unexpected success brings extra revenue to the university, and at least part of the revenue is used

on research. Moreover, they find that the extra research expenditures resulting from football success have a positive impact on articles published, patents filed, and university technology licensing income. Their estimates suggest that “universities earn much as between 15 and 35 cents [from licensing income] on each dollar of research support at the margin. This comes in addition to other private and social benefits (e.g. institutional prestige and spillovers, respectively)”.

*Badger Football was ranked in the top 20 before each season in 2020-2023 (12th in 2020 and 2021, 18th in 2022, and 19th in 2023) but not ranked after any of the four seasons. In other words, Badger Football under-performed in each of these recent seasons. The poor performance could have a negative effect on the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s research expenditures and output. As mentioned above, this would be an additional challenge for the university as it faces significant cuts in research funding from the federal government.*

- Finally, it could reduce the **university’s ranking**. Mulholland et al. (2014) analyzed the peer assessment category of the US News and World Report’s America’s Best Colleges rankings. They find that universities are more highly rated if their football team receives a greater number of votes in either the final Associated Press or Coaches’ Poll. Controlling for other characteristics, their estimates suggest that a university’s peer score increases by about the same amount in the following two cases: (1) a one standard deviation increase in football votes from one season to the next; (2) a 20-point increase in student SAT at the 75th percentile.

*With the university’s ranking already in decline (Guo et al., 2024), poor performance from Badger Football could make it even worse.*

Some of the cited studies estimate only the effect of success, e.g., the effect of winning a conference championship on alumni donations (Meer and Rosen, 2009) and the effect of being ranked in AP Top 20 on student applications (Pope and Pope, 2009). Even if the effect of declining performance is not symmetric, the estimates are informative of **missed opportunities**, i.e., how much the University of Wisconsin-Madison could have been better than it is today had Badger Football won a conference champion or been ranked in AP Top 20 over the last few years. On the other hand, because measures used by Tabakovic and Wollmann (2019) and Mulholland et al. (2014) include both successes and failures, their estimates suggest that Badger Football’s declining performance could reduce the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s research input and output and ranking directly.

*Moreover, Anderson (2017) uses data on bookmaker spreads to estimate the probability of winning each game for college football teams, and conditions on these probabilities to estimate the causal effects of the number of wins in a season on donations, applications,*

*and enrollment in the next year. The estimates imply the following effects for a school that improves its season wins by three games (the approximate difference between the median team and an 85th percentile team): an increase in alumni athletic donations by 17%, an increase in student applications by 3%, a decrease in the acceptance rate by 1.3%, an increase in in-state enrollment by 1.8%, and an increase in incoming 25th percentile SAT scores by 0.2%.*

Overall, the evidence suggests clear complementarities between football and academics. The fact that both are down at the University of Wisconsin-Madison makes it challenging.

Because estimates cited above are average effects across all schools and years in each study's sample, they may not apply exactly to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Moreover, some of the effects are dynamic and may not be observed immediately. For example, the positive effect of a sports team's success on donations made by students on the team after graduation (Meer and Rosen, 2009) cannot be observed from the contemporary relationship between football performance and alumni donations. Finally, as mentioned above, the estimates represent missed opportunities of what could have happened had there been no decline in Badger Football's performance, i.e., *the University of Wisconsin-Madison's alumni donations, student applications, research and ranking could have been better than what they are now even if they have not declined in the last few years.*

## **2 Impact on the Local and State Economy**

Badger Football and other athletic programs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison also affect the local economy in the city of Madison and the broader state of Wisconsin. This includes (1) the impact from direct spending by UW Athletics Department as an employer, a procurer of a wide range of foods and services, and an undertaker of large-scale capital projects, (2) the impact from spending by individuals who attend football games and other events hosted by the UW Athletics Department, (3) the impact from other spending such as the purchase of UW-licensed merchandise in locations besides campus and media buys associated with UW Athletics events, and (4) broader societal impacts, e.g, the reputational enhancement (to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the state of Wisconsin, and to affiliates) that comes from the success of UW Athletics teams.

Econsult Solutions, Inc (2022) estimated these impacts in a report submitted to UW Athletics Department. The main estimates are reported in Table 1. The first row shows that UW Athletics Department generates 3,360 jobs and \$462 million of output each year in the city of Madison. The second row shows that the department generates 5,640 jobs and \$757 million of output each year in the state of Wisconsin. Due to its dominance and popularity, Badger Football accounts for most of the impact.

**Table 1: Economic Impact of University Athletics**

	Employment	Output
University of Wisconsin-Madison Athletics on Madison	3,360	\$462 million
University of Wisconsin-Madison Athletics on Wisconsin	5,640	\$757 million
University of Minnesota Twin Cities Athletics on Twin Cities	1,152	\$298 million
University of Minnesota Twin Cities Athletics on Minnesota	3,572	\$474 million

The last two rows report the corresponding impacts of University of Minnesota Twin Cities Athletics, which are obtained from a similar report by the same firm (Econsult Solutions, Inc, 2023). As shown in Figure 3, Badger Football’s performance was roughly comparable with Minnesota Golden Gophers in 2022–2023 when their economic impacts were evaluated. This suggests that, if Badger Football’s performance remains at its current level, its economic impacts could be similar to those of Minnesota Golden Gophers.

The comparison between the first and last two rows suggests that Badger Football’s poor performance could reduce its impact on the local and state economy by about one third (about \$160 million for Madison and \$280 million for Wisconsin). This is comparable with the potential impact for UW Athletics Department estimated above.

Above estimates abstract from other differences between the two athletics departments, e.g, UW Athletics has 23 different sports teams while UMN Athletics has 22. Moreover, Madison is much smaller than Twin Cities, so that Madison’s economy is likely more sensitive to Badger Football’s performance than the economy of Twin Cities to the performance of Minnesota Golden Gophers. Finally, Badger Football’s performance was worse than Minnesota Golden Gophers in both 2024 (5-7 for Badgers and 8-5 for Golden Gophers) and the current season (2-5 for Badgers and 5-2 for Golden Gophers), so that the negative impact of Badger Football’s declining performance could be worse than above estimates.

### **3 Making Badger Football Great Again**

The above analysis suggests that making Badger Football great again is beneficial to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the city of Madison, and the state of Wisconsin.

Making Badger Football great again requires **investments in both physical capital (e.g., training facilities) and human capital (players, coaches and staff)**, as acknowledged by UW Athletics Director Chris McIntosh in his letter to the Badger nation on Monday: “Athletics is committed to elevating the investment into our football team to position us to compete at the highest level. As a department, we must provide our coaches the tools necessary to succeed. That means more Athletics-funded investments into infrastructure, staffing and, most importantly, student-athletic recruiting and retention. In this new era of

collegiate athletics, the clear reality is that high expectations must be matched with an equal level of support".

The statement and Badger Football's declining performance are consistent with estimates suggesting that UW Athletics is behind many of its peers in football related spending, especially on Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) compensation for football players. Cox (2025b) reports that Badgers spent less on football recruiting last year than most Big Ten schools. Badgers spent \$1.3 million, lower than the average of \$1.8 million among Big Ten schools. Billy Edwards Jr., Badgers' quarterback and highest-paid player, does not make the list of highest-paid quarterbacks in college football that includes 6 quarterbacks for Big Ten schools (Cox, 2025a). Table 2 shows that Wisconsin is behind many of its Big Ten peers in estimated NIL collective funding in 2023–2024.

**Table 2: Estimated NIL Collective Funding in 2023–2024**

University	Amount (\$)
Ohio State	20,253,400
Michigan	16,357,054
Penn State	13,793,489
Indiana	13,631,160
Michigan State	13,035,471
Iowa	9,698,730
Illinois	9,311,667
Wisconsin	8,982,406

Source: <https://nil-ncaa.com/big10/>. Estimates are based on methodology assumptions; not verified contributions.

Because NIL deals are not public information, the list of highest-paid quarterbacks in college football is estimated. NIL Collective Funding in Table 2 is also estimated, because virtually all NIL Collectives are privately controlled and do not publicly report their fundraising or spending. That said, the estimates are consistent qualitatively with other measures of NIL spending in college football. For example, a poll of 17 stakeholders across college football (coaches, NIL collectives, general managers, agents, and administration members) finds that Ohio State is the third biggest NIL spender in college football, Michigan is the seventh biggest, and no other school in Table 2 is in top 10 (Osborne, 2025). Together, the evidence is consistent with McIntosh's acknowledgment that UW Athletics have to elevate the investment into Badger Football.

Empirical evidence suggests the existence of **complementarity between physical capital (e.g., facilities) and human capital (players, coaches and staff)**. In economics, complementarity refers to the idea that two inputs are more productive when used together than separately. In football, facilities and talent are often interdependent: High-

quality facilities enhance the effectiveness of human capital by providing tools for better training, recovery, and preparation, while elite talent attracts further investments and utilizes facilities to their fullest potential. As an example, Texas Christian University (TCU) invested \$650 million in facilities over decades, which paralleled on-field successes like conference championships and a College Football Playoff appearance, by attracting top recruits and enabling efficient coaching (Eagle and Hollis, 2022).

Caro (2012) finds that, for teams in the SEC, the Big Ten, and the Big Twelve, 63-80% of a team's success in their respective conference can be attributed to successful recruiting practices, with investments in facilities playing a supporting role in attracting recruits. Using more recent data (2005–2022) from Power Five programs, Haworth (2023) finds that spending on facilities, coaches and recruitment explain 9.4%, 7.5% and 3.8% of the variance in the number of wins, respectively. Both studies suggest that spending on physical and human capital contributes to football success.

Elevating the investment into Badger Football by targeting the complementarity between physical and human capital could help reverse the team's declining performance. Enhanced facilities can attract top transfers and recruits, while better coaching and talent ensure the return on these assets are maximized. Strategic, dual-focused investments are essential to rebuild competitiveness and mitigate the economic risks estimated above.

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