



Rebuild the Badgers, Not Just the Roster*

*How Wisconsin Fell Behind in College Football's New Market—
and How to Make the Rebuild Last*

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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

Wisconsin football's old model worked. The Badgers found players other programs missed, developed them, and kept them. From 2017 through 2019, Wisconsin won the second-most conference games in the Big Ten while ranking ninth in football spending. Player compensation was constrained and transfers were harder, so Wisconsin could retain much of the return from developing players. Name, image, and likeness (NIL) compensation and freer transfer rules changed that bargain. Development still matters, but success now creates a retention bill.

Wisconsin entered the new market with less room to adjust than many of its peers. Between the FY2017–19 and FY2022–25 averages, Wisconsin's real (inflation-adjusted) Athletics operating spending fell 4.2 percent, weakest among the sixteen public Big Ten programs, while the median of the sixteen rose 7.3 percent. Wisconsin nearly regained its FY2019 level by FY2023, then plateaued as peers kept growing. Football also remained a low reported share of Wisconsin's Athletics budget: 22.7 percent in FY2025 on the federal EADA measure, lowest in the Big Ten. Schools allocate shared costs differently, so 22.7 percent is a reported allocation rather than a complete measure of football's resources. Excluding centrally reported costs narrows the gap but still leaves Wisconsin below the conference norm.

THE POSITION WISCONSIN BROUGHT INTO THE NEW MARKET

-4.2%	22.7%	0 vs. ~4.5
Wisconsin's real Athletics operating-spending growth	Reported football share of Wisconsin Athletics spending	Recruiting/player-personnel titles
FY2017–19 to FY2022–25	FY2025	November 2021 conference count
Public Big Ten median +7.3% ; Wisconsin weakest of 16	Lowest reported share in the Big Ten	Wisconsin 0 ; Big Ten average ~4.5

Wisconsin did respond. Football coaching compensation rose roughly in line with the conference. Recruiting and player-personnel capacity had thinned by 2021, but Wisconsin rebuilt the operation beginning in early 2022. Wisconsin also moved early on campus NIL readiness and support. The clearer delay was on the donor side: Varsity Collective, a donor- and alumni-led NIL collective funded by gifts from alumni and fans, formally launched fourteen months after NIL opened. Since then, Wisconsin has expanded player personnel, scouting, roster management, NIL, and commercial capacity. In September 2026, *The Athletic* estimated that Wisconsin had \$27–31 million available to assemble its roster, roughly the middle of the Big Ten.

That is substantial catch-up. But money can move in one offseason; a front office takes longer to build. Player valuation, portal scouting, contracting, roster planning, and relation-

ships with agents and donors all have to survive changes in coaches and administrators. The immediate football-side rebuild is now well underway. The harder question is whether it lasts.

The rebuild also exposes a separate institutional problem: who controls borrowing and project delivery. Every other Big Ten university can access capital markets on university or system credit. UW–Madison cannot; the State of Wisconsin issues its debt. At the same time, Wisconsin faces roughly \$18 million in new first-year direct revenue-sharing payments to athletes under the House settlement and is completing a \$285.2 million long-lived Athletics project. Those costs should not be financed alike. Player commitments recur every year and require recurring resources. Long-lived facilities can be financed over the years they are used, with repayment identified in advance.

Wisconsin Athletics enters the House era relying little on university or student support for annual operations. In FY2025 it reported no student Athletics fee, returned its direct institutional support, made an additional excess transfer to the university, and reported an operating surplus, although an earlier interest-free campus loan remained outstanding. Athletics should remain self-supporting over time, but that does not require financial separation from the university. A university balance sheet can bridge a temporary shortfall or finance a long-lived asset if repayment responsibility and any subsidy are explicit. The new player market makes that broader financial capacity more valuable even when Athletics remains self-supporting.

Wisconsin rebuilt football once before by changing more than the roster. Beginning in 1990, Chancellor Donna Shalala backed a new direction, Athletic Director Pat Richter rebuilt Athletics, and head coach Barry Alvarez rebuilt football. Much of the immediate football-side rebuild is now visible. Making it last requires a budget that can move with the market, player-market and commercial operations that outlast particular people, and greater UW–Madison authority to borrow for and deliver long-lived projects.

A competitive roster is necessary. But Wisconsin's last great football rebuild succeeded because the institution around the roster changed too. This one will require the same thing.

Wisconsin Has Rebuilt Football Before

Barry Alvarez is rightly associated with Wisconsin's last great football rebuild, but 1990 was not just a coaching hire. Wisconsin had won six games in three seasons and the athletic department was roughly \$2 million in debt. Chancellor Donna Shalala backed a change in direction, Athletic Director Pat Richter rebuilt Athletics, and Alvarez, the new head coach, rebuilt football. The turnaround worked because the institution around the team changed too.

College football changed again, and Wisconsin fell behind: in 2024 and 2025 the Badgers posted back-to-back losing seasons for the first time since 1991 and 1992. Our July report asked why Wisconsin fell behind. This report asks what comes next. Some of the rebuild has already happened. The remaining questions are which changes need to last, how long-lived investment should be financed and delivered, and who pays. Spending alone does not determine wins. Coaching, player evaluation, injuries, scheduling, and luck still matter. But institutions shape what a program can spend, how quickly it can respond, and whether the organization around the roster survives a change in leadership.

1 Wisconsin Was Slow to Adjust

Wisconsin entered the new market with an Athletics budget that had stopped keeping pace with the conference, a low reported football share, and recruiting and personnel capacity that was being rebuilt just as acquiring and retaining players became more expensive. Those weaknesses were easy to overlook while the old model was working. They mattered much more once talent became more expensive and more mobile. Some were visible before the recent losing seasons: recruiting and player-personnel capacity had thinned by 2021, and Wisconsin was rebuilding the operation by early 2022.

Athletics Spending Recovered Slowly, Then Plateaued

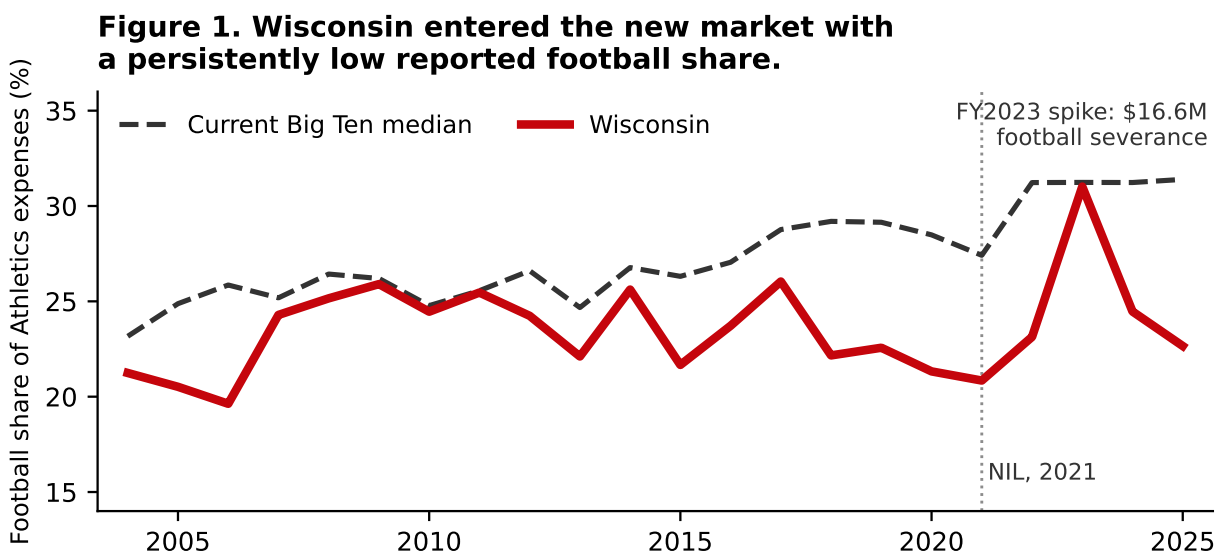
Wisconsin remains one of the larger Athletics departments in the conference. Between the FY2017–19 and FY2022–25 averages, its real (inflation-adjusted) Athletics operating spending fell 4.2 percent, the weakest growth among the sixteen public Big Ten programs, while the public Big Ten median rose 7.3 percent. The averages hide the timing. Setting FY2019 real spending equal to 100, Wisconsin stood at 83.5 in FY2022 and 96.5 in FY2023. It then stopped growing: 98.0 in FY2024 and 98.7 in FY2025. The peer median moved from 92.8 in FY2022 to 99.4, 107.8, and 113.8 over the same years. The gap was not a steady six-year decline. Wisconsin recovered slowly from COVID, nearly returned to its FY2019 level by FY2023, and then plateaued while peers kept growing.

Revenue lagged too, but by less. On the same sixteen-program sample, Wisconsin's real Athletics revenue fell 1.1 percent while the median rose 2.4 percent, a 3.5-point gap compared with an 11.5-point spending-growth gap. Spending fell further behind than revenue

did. By FY2024–25, Wisconsin’s real revenue had also stopped growing while peer revenue continued to rise. The data do not identify how much of that late weakness came from football performance or from other causes.

Football’s Reported Share Remained Low

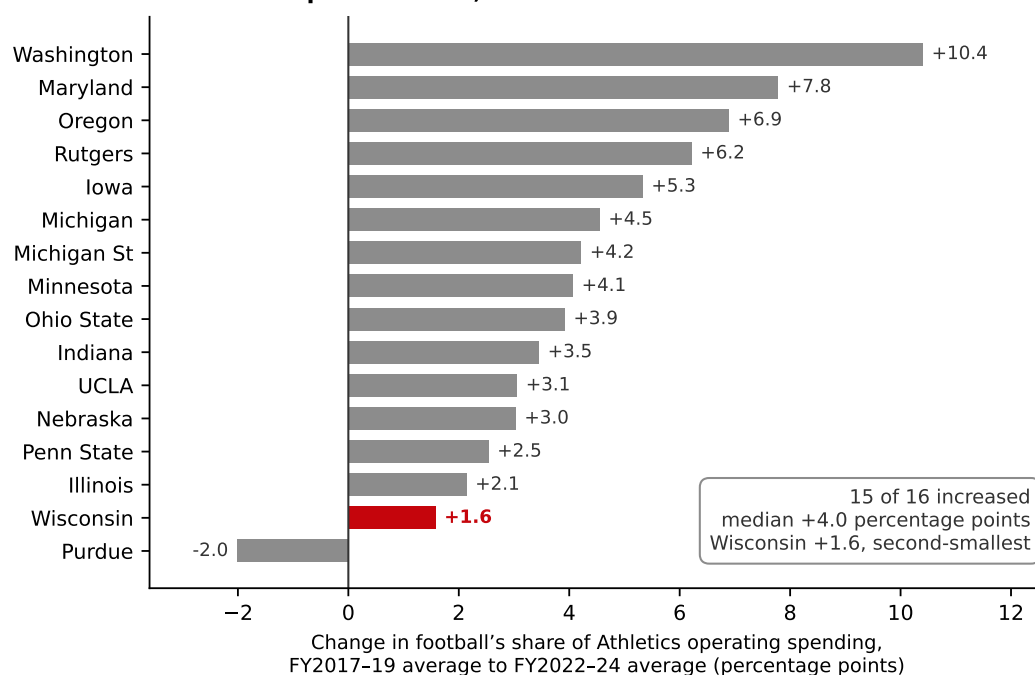
Football also entered the new market with a low reported share. On the U.S. Department of Education’s Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) measure, football accounted for 23.1 percent of Wisconsin Athletics spending in FY2022, the lowest share among the 17 programs reporting that year; 24.5 percent in FY2024, the lowest among all 18 current Big Ten programs; and 22.7 percent in FY2025, again the lowest in the Big Ten. The FY2022–24 average was 26.2 percent, second-lowest. A low football share had not prevented Wisconsin from winning under the old rules. The question was what happened after the economics of football changed.



Source: EADA, all current Big Ten members, FY2004–FY2025. Football share is football total expenses divided by total Athletics expenses. FY2023 Wisconsin includes \$16.6 million of football coaching severance. EADA excludes debt service, so Wisconsin’s FY2025 reassignment of facilities debt service in the NCAA Membership Financial Reporting System (MFRS) does not affect this series. Maryland did not report in FY2006–FY2007 and Penn State did not report in FY2021–FY2022; those institution-years are absent from the median.

On the NCAA financial reports, most peers reported a larger shift toward football. For each public Big Ten program, we calculate football’s share of Athletics operating spending after removing identifiable football coaching severance from the numerator and both coaching severance and Category 50 excess transfers to the institution from the denominator. Between the FY2017–19 and FY2022–24 averages, 15 of the 16 public Big Ten programs increased that reported football share. The median increase was 4.0 percentage points. Wisconsin’s share rose 1.6 points, the second-smallest increase in the conference.

Figure 2. On the NCAA operating measure, most public Big Ten programs increased football's reported share; Wisconsin's increase was smaller than most.



Note: Change in football's share of Athletics operating spending, FY2017-19 average to FY2022-24 average, sixteen public Big Ten programs. Football spending is net of identified football coaching severance; total Athletics operating spending is net of coaching severance and MFRS Category 50 excess transfers to the institution. FY2025 is excluded because Wisconsin changed the assignment of facilities debt service in MFRS that year. *Source:* Knight-Newhouse/NCAA MFRS; authors' calculations.

Reported football shares do not capture football's full economic footprint, because schools differ in how they assign shared costs and Wisconsin reports unusually large central expenses. On an alternative EADA measure that leaves out Athletics costs not assigned to any sport, Wisconsin's football share is still below the Big Ten median, but by less, and its change over time is around the conference norm. So the evidence that Wisconsin's reported football share is low is stronger than the evidence that it grew more slowly than peers'. On the NCAA operating measure shown in Figure 2, however, Wisconsin's reported share rose less than at most public Big Ten peers.

A low reported football share was not a problem while Wisconsin was winning under the old model. It mattered more once acquiring and retaining players became more expensive. Wisconsin could still create value by finding and developing players other programs overlooked, but it could no longer assume that it would keep that value at the old price. With total spending no longer growing with the conference and football's reported allocation still low, catching up required new revenue, a different allocation, or both.

Recruiting and Personnel

Wisconsin kept pace on coaching compensation. Football coaching compensation rose 31.6 percent in real terms between the FY2017–19 and FY2022–25 averages, almost exactly matching the public Big Ten median of 31.5 percent.

The staffing history is more revealing. After director of player personnel Saeed Khalif left for Michigan State in June 2021, a November 2021 *Wisconsin State Journal* count of recruiting and player-personnel titles on official Big Ten websites found none at Wisconsin, compared with about 4.5 across the conference. Khalif separately told *The Athletic* that Wisconsin’s recruiting staff had reached four full-time employees at its peak and had fallen to two during the pandemic; his new Michigan State operation had twelve. The measures are not perfectly comparable, but both point in the same direction. Wisconsin rebuilt the operation in early 2022 with a staff of at least eight and dedicated responsibilities for the transfer portal, high-school recruiting, on-campus recruiting, and creative work. Director of recruiting Mickey Turner described the expansion as putting “a lot more fuel” into the operation. That rebuild was part of a broader organizational change. Among six public Big Ten programs with sufficiently complete official staff pages in 2019, 2022, and 2026, the median number of dedicated recruiting, personnel, and scouting staff rose from four to 7.5. Wisconsin went from four to eight to seven; by 2026, its structure had shifted toward director- and general-manager-level roles.

Wisconsin was also preserving a broad Athletics program. Athletic Director Chris McIntosh told Congress in 2025 that football and men’s basketball were the only two of Wisconsin’s 23 varsity sports generating positive net revenue and that those revenues help fund the other 21. Other Big Ten departments responded differently: some eliminated sports, some cut elsewhere, some raised more revenue, and others preserved broad portfolios while growing their overall budgets. Wisconsin chose to keep all 23 sports. A more expensive football market had to be financed alongside that commitment.

The NIL story is more mixed. Wisconsin moved early on NIL readiness and campus support. It launched YouDub in June 2021, before NIL took effect; partnered with Altius and launched the YouDub Marketplace in April 2022; named dedicated NIL leadership that August; and expanded on-campus support and commercial capacity in 2023 and 2024. The donor-facing vehicle, Varsity Collective, formally launched on September 9, 2022, fourteen months after NIL opened and after most of Wisconsin’s then-Big Ten peers already had operating donor or fan collectives.

Figure 3. Wisconsin's NIL and player-market buildout developed in stages.



Note: Preliminary Varsity Collective activity began in June 2022; the fourteen-month figure uses its September 9 formal public launch. The December 2025 marker denotes the launch of the integrated commercial operation, not the beginning of Wisconsin's NIL administration.

Football's personnel structure continued to develop. Wisconsin rebuilt recruiting in 2022, restored and expanded player-personnel and scouting functions under head coach Luke Fickell in 2023, and added further depth in 2024. In February 2025, Wisconsin centralized roster management, player personnel, and operations under Marcus Sedberry as football general manager. In June 2026, after Sedberry became interim athletic director, longtime NFL personnel executive Morocco Brown succeeded him as general manager, and the structure added further specialized personnel and scouting roles. The new player market requires Wisconsin to value players, identify roster needs, recruit and retain talent, manage agents and contracts, and connect roster decisions to available resources. Those functions were much smaller under the old model; they are now a routine part of day-to-day roster management.

Development Now Creates a Retention Bill

Wisconsin's traditional advantage was finding players other programs undervalued, improving them, and keeping the return. NIL and the portal changed the last step. A player Wisconsin develops can now leave more easily, and competing programs can bid for him after Wisconsin has borne the development cost. Development remains valuable, but retaining the value it creates has become more expensive.

Iowa provides a useful comparison because it has preserved a development-heavy model in the same conference. In FY2025, Iowa reported 33.7 percent of Athletics spending assigned to football on the same federal EADA measure, compared with Wisconsin's 22.7 percent. *The Athletic* estimated Iowa's 2026 roster resources below Wisconsin's. The comparison matters because roster dollars and football's share of Athletics spending measure different things. A development model needs both: money for the roster and the capacity to identify, recruit, evaluate, and retain players.

FY2025 EADA REPORTED FOOTBALL SHARE
IOWA 33.7% — WISCONSIN 22.7%

Wisconsin still benefits from finding and improving players that other programs miss, but it must now budget for retaining successful players as well as acquiring them. Development still creates value; it no longer locks in a cost advantage for four or five years.

Roster Spending and the Front Office

The Athletic estimated that Wisconsin had \$27–31 million available to assemble its 2026 roster, eighth in the Big Ten on that estimate and roughly in the middle of the conference. Iowa was estimated at \$17–21 million, while the highest-spending Big Ten programs were near \$50 million. These are reported estimates rather than audited university accounts, but they show how far Wisconsin has moved in a short time.

Money can move in one offseason; a working front office takes longer. Relationships with agents and donors, player-valuation routines, contracting experience, and roster planning have to be learned and retained. Wisconsin has now built much of that operation. The test is whether it survives the next change in coach, administrator, or market rule.

Where Wisconsin Was Slow to Adjust

Wisconsin did respond in important ways. It kept pace with the conference on coaching compensation and moved early on NIL readiness and campus support. But several other adjustments were smaller or came later than at many of its peers.

- **Athletics spending.** Wisconsin's real operating spending fell **4.2%** while the public Big Ten median rose **7.3%**. Revenue growth also lagged, but the spending-growth gap was much larger.
- **Football allocation.** Fifteen of sixteen public Big Ten programs increased football's reported share on the NCAA operating measure. Wisconsin's increase was **second-smallest**; its FY2025 EADA football share was **22.7%, lowest in the Big Ten**.
- **Recruiting and personnel.** Dedicated capacity had thinned at the critical 2021 moment. A *Wisconsin State Journal* count of official Big Ten staff listings found no recruiting or player-personnel titles at Wisconsin versus about **4.5 per program**; Wisconsin rebuilt the operation beginning in 2022.
- **Donor-facing NIL.** Varsity Collective formally launched **14 months after NIL opened**, after most of Wisconsin's then-Big Ten rivals already had operating collectives.

Peers created room in different ways—through revenue growth, donors, reserves, loans or university support, and cuts elsewhere. There was no single model. Wisconsin's problem was not one decision or one missing expenditure. Several major adjustments had to be made at roughly the same time.

Wisconsin made these adjustments while keeping all 23 sports and while operating inside a university with competing claims on flexible resources, unusual bonding constraints, and a state-run process for delivering debt-financed projects. We cannot cleanly separate constraint from choice. Much of the response is now visible: Wisconsin has increased roster resources, rebuilt recruiting and player personnel, expanded NIL and commercial

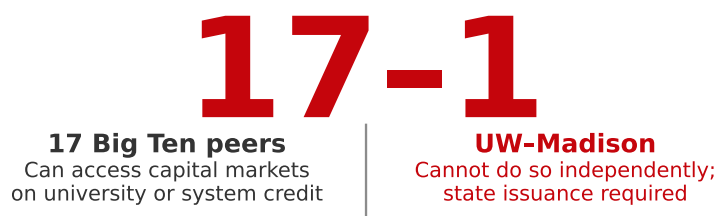
capacity, and created a general-manager structure. Those are the changes that now have to survive the next shift in the market.

2 Wisconsin's Bonding and Project-Delivery Constraint

UW–Madison has revenue and its own capital-planning and project-management expertise. The problem is that the authority is split. UW–Madison cannot issue debt against its own revenues. Projects financed with state-issued debt go through the state building program, in which the Department of Administration's Division of Facilities Development provides project management, construction oversight, and architecture/engineering and construction contracts. UW's separate project-delivery authority applies to projects financed entirely with gifts and grants.

The result is that revenue, borrowing, project scope, schedule, delivery, and repayment do not sit in one place. For a long-lived project, those decisions belong together. Splitting them can add time and make it harder to adjust a project as conditions change, especially when facilities and recurring player costs are competing for current cash.

Figure 4. UW–Madison is the Big Ten exception.



UW can make the payments. The State has to do the borrowing.

Note: The comparison concerns access to capital markets on university or system credit. UW can use borrowed money and Athletics can repay it; the State of Wisconsin is the issuer. Peer comparison is based on official university, system, conduit-issuer, or statutory debt authority.

The Kellner Family Athletic Center shows how the current arrangement works. The \$285.2 million project combines \$120 million of state-issued borrowing that Athletics will repay, \$50 million in state cash, and \$115.2 million in Athletics funds and gifts. It is a major long-lived investment in Wisconsin Athletics. Its financing also illustrates the distinction at the center of this section: Athletics can repay debt that UW–Madison cannot itself issue.

A Wisconsin Precedent: Camp Randall

In 2002, a stalled Camp Randall renovation moved forward after UW reduced the project's planned cost, built new revenue around suites and premium seating, secured a \$10 million gift from the Kellner family, and adopted a twenty-year Athletics financial plan. About \$6 million of the gift supported Camp Randall and \$4 million supported academic programming. Athletics committed to making the renovation self-supporting. The project, its revenue plan, and its long-term financing plan were designed together.

Wisconsin is again financing a long-lived Athletics project while taking on a larger annual player bill. The project uses one arrangement: the State issues \$120 million of debt and Athletics repays it. Act 203 uses another. It provides \$14.6 million a year for principal and interest on qualifying Athletics facilities. Some state support for that debt service existed before the act, so the public record does not show that the full \$14.6 million is new.

The UW System fiscal estimate said the relief would free Athletics revenue for athlete contracts. That does not mean Wisconsin should borrow to pay players. Recurring player costs raise the opportunity cost of paying for a long-lived building from current cash. Financing an appropriate project over the years it is used avoids forcing a multi-decade asset to compete dollar-for-dollar with a one-year roster.

Act 203 changes who pays. Greater UW–Madison bonding authority need not. UW–Madison could borrow against a defined Athletics revenue stream and leave repayment with Athletics. It could also decide how much of a long-lived investment to finance over time, which future revenue stream will repay it, and on what schedule. Financing and subsidy are separate decisions.

3 Different Costs Require Different Financing

Wisconsin now faces three distinct financial pressures: an Athletics spending path that did not grow with the conference as the player market changed, large recurring House payments, and a \$285.2 million long-lived capital project. One describes the budget Wisconsin brought into the new market, one recurs every year, and one is an asset used over decades; they should not be financed the same way.

Three Financial Facts

Athletics spending: Wisconsin real Athletics operating spending, FY2017–19 to FY2022–25, **–4.2%**; public Big Ten median **+7.3%**

House recurring payments: About **\$18 million** in new first-year direct revenue-sharing payments after expected Alston credit

Kellner Family Athletic Center: **\$285.2 million** long-lived capital project

The House settlement created a new system of direct school payments to athletes. Wisconsin's first-year pool is about \$20.5 million; expected credit for existing Alston academic awards of roughly \$2.5 million, which count against the cap, leaves about \$18 million in new direct revenue-sharing payments. Wisconsin's earlier adjustment did not create the House payments or the need for the Kellner facility. It did mean that these new demands arrived while Wisconsin was still adjusting its budget, allocation, and organization to the earlier market change.

NIL and the portal changed the economics before House changed the accounting. Retaining a successful player had already become more expensive even when much of the

payment sat outside Athletics’ books. House moved a substantial part of that cost onto the department’s books just as Big Ten media revenue was rising sharply. But much of that media increase is common across the conference. The House cap is also a common ceiling: for programs spending near it, part of the common revenue gain now goes to a player cost that their peers near the cap face too. The competition for relative advantage continues alongside the cap through third-party NIL and school-specific donor and commercial resources. A richer Big Ten does not by itself make Wisconsin richer relative to the Big Ten.

The pressure was already visible before House. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 49 of 69 Power-conference Athletics programs spent more than they generated in Athletics revenue in 2023–24, while college contributions to Power Athletics had risen from \$445 million to \$1.2 billion over the previous decade. Across the country, Athletics departments were drawing more heavily on resources beyond traditional Athletics-generated revenue. That does not mean Wisconsin should have relied more on university support. It does mean some peers had other balance-sheet resources available as costs rose.

To isolate new responses rather than long-standing subsidy models, Table 1 focuses on six public Big Ten programs that entered the first House year with little or no material pre-existing recurring university support. All six funded revenue sharing at or near the first-year cap, but their universities did not respond in the same way.

Table 1. Selected public Big Ten programs used different university-support arrangements in the first House year

Program	House sharing / own-source revenue	University support in first House year
Purdue	13.6%	Undrawn three-year university backstop
Oregon	11.1%	No new university cash
Nebraska	9.5%	No new university cash; \$5 million academic-scholarship transfer continues
Michigan	7.4%	Reported \$15 million university support; form undisclosed
Penn State	7.2%	No new House-era university cash
Ohio State	5.4%	No new House-era university cash; pre-existing pandemic loan continues

Note: FY2026 revenue sharing divided by FY2025 own-source Athletics revenue, a measure of the size of the new payments. All six programs funded revenue sharing at or near the first-year cap. The support column describes each university’s arrangement, not the share of House payments it covered. Detail is in the House year note in Sources and Notes. *Source:* Institutional budget records and board reporting, FY2026; Knight-Newhouse FY2025 own-source Athletics revenue.

Michigan reported \$15 million in university support, although its public materials do not say whether the money was a transfer, loan, or advance. Purdue had an undrawn three-year university backstop. Oregon, Nebraska, Penn State, and Ohio State took no new House-era university cash. The new player bill was common; the financial boundary around Athletics was not. Schools made different choices about transfers, loans, backstops, and their own resources.

Wisconsin Athletics entered the House era relying little on university or student support for its annual operations. In FY2025, its \$7.2 million of direct institutional support was returned in full to the university, and Athletics made an additional \$4.2 million excess transfer to the institution. Wisconsin also reported \$3.2 million of state support and no student Athletics fee. Netting those reported support and transfer categories leaves Athletics a net contributor of about \$1.1 million, and the department also reported a \$4.3 million operating surplus. The annual-flow comparison is not the whole relationship, because roughly \$15.7 million remained outstanding on an earlier \$20 million interest-free campus loan, with repayments paused. That FY2025 annual-flow baseline is separate from Act 203's \$14.6 million annual appropriation for qualifying Athletics debt service, discussed above.

Private Money Does Not Remove the Tradeoff

Private giving avoids a direct bill to students or taxpayers, but Athletics and academics do not draw on completely separate donor communities. Major donors can support scholarships, faculty, buildings, research, Athletics, and other university priorities. Public data do not tell us how much an additional Athletics gift reduces, increases, or leaves unchanged giving elsewhere at UW.

Wisconsin's Athletics donor base is highly concentrated. In 2025, the top 0.8 percent of donors supplied nearly half of all donations, while 7.3 percent supplied almost three-quarters. More than 300 donors had also committed over \$92 million to the Building Champions Campaign. A capital campaign ends; player-market spending does not. New commercial revenue or genuinely new donors enlarge the resource base. Repeated appeals to the same major donors can instead shift resources among existing university priorities. That tradeoff matters especially now because flexible donor dollars are unusually valuable on the academic side of UW as well.

4 Who Pays?

Who pays should depend first on what is being financed. Football generates substantial Athletics revenue and now creates recurring player-market costs, so those commitments should ordinarily rest on recurring Athletics resources. Long-lived Athletics projects can be financed over time, with repayment identified in advance. University and taxpayer support are different because those resources have uses outside Athletics.

Wisconsin reported no student Athletics fee in FY2025, and on the support and transfer categories described above Athletics was a net contributor rather than a net recipient. The argument here is not that Wisconsin students currently subsidize football through an Athletics fee, nor that tuition should be earmarked for Athletics. But tuition can matter to Athletics through the financial capacity of the university around it. Tuition and state operating support jointly finance core university operations and can substitute for one another at the margin: if one is constrained, the other must rise, another flexible source must replace it, or core spending has to adjust. The Universities of Wisconsin make that tradeoff unusually concrete in their current budget request, which proposes a resident undergraduate tuition freeze provided the State invests \$190 million to support the cost of the freeze and other operating needs.

Not every university dollar can fill that role. Many research grants, contracts, and private gifts are restricted to particular purposes. Whether the university chooses to transfer, lend, backstop, or otherwise support Athletics is a separate decision; its capacity to do so depends on the size and flexibility of its own finances. Athletics and academics have distinct budgets, but they are not economically separate.

Table 2. Different payers, different relationships to the cost

Payer	Why the payer may be connected to Athletics	Financing principle used in this report
Athletics	Football generates substantial revenue and incurs recurring player-market costs.	Recurring commitments are ordinarily supported by recurring Athletics resources; debt used principally for Athletics projects carries an identified repayment source and plan.
Donors	Donors voluntarily support programs they value and can add resources to UW.	One-time gifts can bridge a transition, but recurring obligations need a durable funding base; donor capacity can overlap with academic priorities.
Students	Students receive part of the direct benefit from the broader university experience Athletics helps provide.	Wisconsin currently reports no Athletics fee; any future student contribution should be considered separately from general tuition.
University	Athletics can contribute to student life, institutional identity, alumni ties, and other university purposes.	University support is evaluated against a broader university benefit rather than treated as the automatic payer.
Taxpayers	Some benefits may extend beyond UW and its direct beneficiaries.	State support is a distinct policy choice whose rationale rests on a stated public purpose.

Financial self-support over time is not the same as financial separation. The new player market leaves less of football's revenue uncommitted inside Athletics. Direct revenue sharing now places a recurring player cost on the department's books, while NIL and freer transfers keep the market for scarce players open alongside it. At programs that compete near the House cap, much of the player bill returns every season even though gate, post-season, and other revenues still move with results. More of Athletics' revenue is therefore committed before the season unfolds, leaving less room for other sports, facilities, reserves, or transfers.

That makes the university balance sheet more useful even if the university never pays the player bill. It can finance a long-lived asset, bridge a temporary shortfall, or provide a backstop while leaving repayment with Athletics. Wisconsin's COVID loan shows how that can work when a shock actually occurs; subsequent transfers back to UW show that money can move in the other direction. Purdue's reported undrawn university backstop makes the same point without a cash transfer: the backstop has value because it is there if needed. Temporary support should not quietly become permanent support. The terms should be clear from the start: who repays, from which revenue stream, on what schedule, and whether any portion is a subsidy.

5 Making the Rebuild Last

Much of the immediate football-side rebuild is now in place. The next task is to make those changes last. What has to last is not a particular roster or season. It is the institution behind them: a budget that can move when the player market moves, a front office and commercial operation that survive changes in personnel, and a university with enough financial capacity and authority to finance long-lived investment and bridge temporary shocks without obscuring who ultimately pays. The market will change again.

5.1 Keep the Budget Responsive

Wisconsin can respond through both the size of the Athletics budget and its internal allocation. Its total operating budget did not grow with the conference, and football's reported allocation remained low. No particular football share guarantees success, and the accounting does not identify a correct percentage. But when one of the department's main revenue-generating activities becomes more expensive, the budget eventually has to respond through a larger resource base, a different allocation, or both.

A rolling multi-year Athletics financial plan would make those choices visible. The 2002 Camp Randall plan provides a Wisconsin precedent for pairing a long-lived project with dedicated revenue and a multiyear financial plan. A modern plan should separately show recurring player-market commitments, recurring Athletics revenues, capital debt service, and any university or state support over several years. It would not dictate the allocation; it would make the tradeoffs visible before a shortfall dictates it.

5.2 Make the Player-Market Operation Permanent

Wisconsin has already rebuilt much of this operation. Recruiting and personnel capacity expanded under Luke Fickell in 2023 and 2024; the formal general-manager structure arrived in 2025; Morocco Brown became general manager in June 2026; and Shawn Eichorst became Director of Athletics in July. The task now is to make the operation survive future changes in personnel.

A permanent operation must be able to value players, identify roster needs, recruit and retain talent, manage agents and contracts, connect roster decisions to available resources, and act quickly. The test is whether the operation survives the people who built it.

5.3 Where Should These Functions Live?

Wisconsin now has much more of the player-market and commercial operation it needs. The remaining governance question is where the decisions should sit. Day-to-day player personnel, roster management, staffing, contracts, NIL sales, and commercial relationships need to be handled at market speed. Decisions that commit the university's balance sheet or create long-lived financial obligations are different.

One option is a more separate Athletics structure. Another is to keep Athletics inside UW while giving Athletics and the university greater authority over the decisions each is best positioned to make. Separation can sharpen operating boundaries. Keeping Athletics inside the university preserves access to a larger and more diversified balance sheet, including the ability to bridge temporary shortfalls or finance long-lived assets against identified future revenues.

The contrast is visible elsewhere. Florida and Florida State show one model: Athletics-specific borrowing, carried by an athletic association or secured by Athletics and booster revenues rather than by the university's general credit. Michigan and Penn State show another: university-level borrowing for Athletics projects, with the cost assigned to Athletics. Who borrows and who ultimately repays are separate choices. A narrow Athletics credit can work; university-level borrowing preserves a broader balance sheet while still leaving the bill with Athletics.

The evidence here does not identify an optimal legal form. The principle is simpler. Ordinary player-personnel and commercial decisions should sit close to the people who know the market. Decisions that commit university credit or expose university resources should remain under university-level oversight. Repayment responsibility should be set in advance.

Recurring player-market commitments still need a durable funding base. One-time gifts, temporary surpluses, bridge money, and unusually strong fundraising years can finance a transition. They are fragile foundations for obligations that return every season.

5.4 Give UW–Madison Bonding Authority and Greater Control Over Project Delivery

Borrowing and project delivery are where Wisconsin's current rules most clearly limit that division of responsibility. UW–Madison can generate the revenue and Athletics can repay the debt, but the university does not have its own bonding authority. The State issues the debt. And projects financed with state-issued debt go through the state building process administered by the Department of Administration.

Wisconsin should give UW–Madison bonding authority over defined, legally available university revenue streams and greater control over the projects that borrowing finances. An Athletics project could still be repaid from Athletics revenues. Giving UW control over the financing and delivery of a project does not require shifting the bill to the university or taxpayers. University borrowing and university subsidy are separate decisions.

Athletics-only borrowing can work, but it rests on a narrower revenue base. University-level bonding authority preserves access to a larger and more diversified balance sheet while still allowing repayment to come from the Athletics revenues supporting the project.

Wisconsin already has a related precedent. Chapter 233 gives the University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority borrowing and facilities powers while preserving statutory and public oversight. It shows that substantial financial authority can be delegated without giving up public accountability.

Greater authority should come with debt limits, reserve and debt-service coverage requirements, Board of Regents oversight, audit, and public reporting. UW–Madison could then bring the revenue plan, borrowing, project scope, delivery, and repayment together instead of reconstructing those arrangements project by project.

Delay can raise construction costs, postpone the revenue a project is expected to generate, or cause a time-sensitive opportunity to pass. The point is not simply to shorten approvals. It is to let financing, project scope, and delivery move together when timing matters.

Athletics should remain self-supporting over time. UW–Madison could borrow for an Athletics project while assigning repayment to an identified Athletics revenue stream. A larger balance sheet can bridge timing risk without making the university or taxpayers the permanent payer. The terms should be explicit in advance: who repays, from which revenue stream, on what schedule, and whether any portion is a university or public subsidy.

Conclusion

Wisconsin's last great football rebuild began before the roster changed. Chancellor Donna Shalala backed a new direction, Athletic Director Pat Richter rebuilt Athletics, and Barry Alvarez rebuilt football. Alvarez succeeded because the institution around him changed too.

College football has changed again. Talent now has a much more explicit market price and is much more mobile. Wisconsin entered the new market with an Athletics budget that had stopped keeping pace with the conference, a low reported football allocation, and recruiting and personnel capacity that was being rebuilt. Wisconsin has since moved substantially. Roster resources are now roughly in the middle of the Big Ten, the personnel operation has been rebuilt around a general-manager structure, and NIL and commercial capacity have expanded. The immediate football-side rebuild is well underway.

Making it last means building something that survives roster turnover, leadership changes, and the next change in the market. It requires more than maintaining the roster budget. Recurring Athletics commitments should ordinarily rest on durable Athletics resources. The budget has to move when the market moves, and the player-market and commercial operations have to outlast the people who built them. Long-lived investment is different. UW–Madison needs bonding authority and greater control over project delivery.

The new player market makes the university around Athletics more important, not less. Player costs remain Athletics obligations, but donors, commercial relationships, long-lived projects, and temporary financial shocks connect Athletics to the rest of UW. The strength and flexibility of the university's own finances therefore matter even when no tuition dollar is earmarked for football. Financial self-support does not require financial separation. A larger university balance sheet can bridge timing risk or finance a long-lived asset while leaving repayment with Athletics, provided the terms and any subsidy are clear.

The appropriate boundary depends on the decision. Player-personnel and commercial decisions should sit close to the people who know the market. Decisions that commit university credit or expose university resources should remain under university-level oversight. Bonding and project delivery are where Wisconsin's current rules most clearly constrain that division of responsibility.

A competitive roster is necessary. But Wisconsin's last great football rebuild succeeded because the institution around the roster changed too. This one will require the same thing.

Sources and Notes

The old model. The statement that Wisconsin won the second-most conference games in the Big Ten from 2017 through 2019 while ranking ninth in football spending is carried forward from our July report, *The Collapse of Badger Football Is Not a Football Story*, which ranked Big Ten programs on federal EADA football expenses.

Athletic scholarships under the old model. GAO-26-108640 notes that athletics scholarships were the slowest-growing of the major Division I spending categories between 2014–15 and 2023–24 and states that NCAA scholarship limits in place at the time may partly explain that pattern. The report uses that finding only as institutional context for the statement that the old model constrained athlete compensation; a scholarship-count limit is a quantity restriction, not itself a literal price ceiling.

The 1990 founding. Our July report, *The Collapse of Badger Football Is Not a Football Story*, noted that in 1990 Wisconsin's football program had won six games in three seasons and Athletics was about \$2 million in debt when Chancellor Donna Shalala backed a major change in direction. Season records: Wisconsin went 5–7 in 2024 and 4–8 in 2025; its previous consecutive losing seasons were 1991 and 1992, both 5–6, in Alvarez's second and third years.

Athletics operating-spending measures. Authors' calculations use the Knight-Newhouse/NCAA MFRS panel for sixteen public Big Ten programs and CPI-U in 2025 dollars. Total Athletics operating spending is Knight-Newhouse Total Expenses less MFRS Category 50 excess transfers to the institution less coaching severance, for every school. Knight-Newhouse Total Expenses includes Category 50 where Knight records it. Knight records nonzero Category 50 for Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, Ohio State, and Purdue in at least some years of the comparison window, but records Wisconsin as zero even though Wisconsin's own filings report nonzero Category 50 separately. Wisconsin's Knight Total Expenses equals the filing's operating-expense total that excludes Category 50, so subtracting the Knight Category 50 field for all schools puts the denominators on one operating basis without double-adjusting Wisconsin. On that definition Wisconsin's real spending fell 4.2 percent between the FY2017–19 and FY2022–25 averages against a public Big Ten median increase of 7.3 percent, a gap of 11.5 percentage points. On the same operating measure, Wisconsin's department ranked fourth of the sixteen in FY2019 and sixth in FY2025. Wisconsin had the weakest growth of the sixteen programs and remains weakest using a FY2022–24 endpoint, a FY2016–19 baseline, a FY2024–25 endpoint, or annual medians in place of period means. Without the Category 50 adjustment the median is 6.9 percent. Wisconsin's transfers to campus are not a component of the spending gap; they are

a separate fact about where its surplus went. Football coaching compensation is MFRS Category 22 and excludes severance; Wisconsin's real coaching pay rose 31.6 percent compared with 31.5 percent at the conference median. Real total Athletics revenue on the same sixteen programs and windows fell 1.1 percent at Wisconsin against a median increase of 2.4 percent (fifth-weakest of sixteen); on the thirteen legacy public members, Wisconsin's –1.1 percent compares with a median of +4.8 percent.

Spending timing. Setting each program's real operating spending to FY2019 = 100, Wisconsin was 83.5 in FY2022, 96.5 in FY2023, 98.0 in FY2024, and 98.7 in FY2025; the corresponding peer medians, taken over the other fifteen public Big Ten programs, were 92.8, 99.4, 107.8, and 113.8.

EADA football shares. EADA, all 18 current Big Ten members. The standard measure is football total expenses divided by grand total Athletics expenses, the same measure used in the July report. Wisconsin's football share was 23.1 percent in FY2022, lowest among the 17 programs reporting that year; 24.5 percent in FY2024, lowest among all 18; and 22.7 percent in FY2025, again lowest among all 18. Wisconsin's official FY2025 EADA filing reports football expenses of \$40,903,448 and grand total expenses of \$180,525,755, implying a 22.66 percent share. Iowa's FY2025 share was 33.7 percent on the same measure. The FY2022–24 Wisconsin average was 26.2 percent, second-lowest. Wisconsin's FY2023 share was temporarily elevated by \$16.6 million of football coaching severance. EADA expressly excludes capital expenditures and debt service from both team expenses and expenses not allocated by sport, so Wisconsin's FY2025 reassignment of facilities debt service in the NCAA Membership Financial Reporting System (MFRS) is not an EADA reporting break and is not annotated as one in the EADA series.

Reported allocation and shared expenses. Both EADA and NCAA MFRS contain institution-specific judgments about whether shared Athletics expenses are assigned to a sport or reported centrally. The U.S. Department of Education defines EADA expenses not allocated by gender/sport as expenses not attributable to a particular sport and lists athletic administrators, trainers, support staff, and general overhead among the examples. It prescribes no general allocation method. NCAA's 2026 Agreed-Upon Procedures direct institutions to allocate revenues and expenses by sport where feasible but likewise prescribe no general method; the procedures verify reported amounts against accounting records but do not test the assignment of those amounts across sport columns. NCAA MFRS also differs mechanically from EADA because it reports facilities debt service, whereas EADA excludes debt service entirely.

Wisconsin's EADA not-allocated share was 35.0 percent in FY2017, close to the public Big Ten peer median of 34.6 percent. It rose to 39.3 percent in FY2018, 41.1 percent in FY2019, 43.7 percent in FY2022, 39.1 percent in FY2023, and 42.8 percent in FY2024; the peer median in FY2024 was 32.5 percent. No public source reviewed for this report explains the change. On an alternative EADA denominator that excludes expenses not attributed to a specific sport, Wisconsin's FY2022–24 football share is 44.9 percent versus a Big Ten median of 47.7 percent. Wisconsin remains below the median in level, although the gap is smaller. Once the FY2023 severance year is handled, Wisconsin's change on this alternative denominator is around the conference norm. The alternative denominator is therefore used as a robustness check, not as a corrected estimate of football's economic share: it removes the central pool from the denominator while leaving each institution's own football attribution in the numerator.

Clean MFRS football-allocation change. For the sixteen public current Big Ten programs, Figure 2 uses the Knight-Newhouse/NCAA MFRS panel and defines each school-year's reported football operating share as $(\text{Total Football Spending} - \text{Total Football Coaching Severance}) / (\text{Total Expenses} - \text{Category 50 Excess Transfers to Institution} - \text{Total Coaching Severance})$. No value is imputed. The comparison uses the FY2017–19 average and FY2022–24 average; FY2025 is excluded because Wisconsin reassigned facilities debt service out of its football column that year. Fifteen of sixteen programs increased the reported football share. The median increase was 3.99 percentage points; Wisconsin rose 1.58 points, second-smallest. Using medians of annual shares gives the same ranking: 15 of 16 increased, the median change was 4.45 points, and Wisconsin rose 1.01 points, again second-smallest. The measure is a reported budget-allocation measure, not an estimate of every resource economically consumed by football.

Recruiting staffing, 2019–2022. *Wisconsin State Journal* (Colten Bartholomew), November 28, 2021, counted recruiting and player-personnel titles on official Big Ten websites and found Wisconsin with none after the June 2021 departures, compared with a conference average of about 4.5 and as many as seven at Maryland and Penn State; Athletic Director Chris McIntosh said the positions would be filled. *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 27, 2022, reported that Wisconsin had put Mickey Turner, listed on the 2022 staff page as director of recruiting, in charge of recruiting and was building a staff of at least eight, “at least double” its size before the prior summer, with dedicated roles for the transfer portal, high-school recruiting, on-campus recruiting, and video/graphics. Turner described the expansion as restarting parts of the recruiting operation and adding substantially more resources; head coach Paul Chryst said Wisconsin had continued recruiting and declined to say that the program had fallen behind. Saeed Khalif, Wisconsin's director of player personnel from 2017 to June 2021, told *The Athletic* (Jesse Tem-

ple, August 10, 2021) that Wisconsin's recruiting staff had reached four full-time employees at its peak and had been reduced to two during the pandemic, which he attributed to staff cuts and furloughs; his new Michigan State operation had twelve. Khalif also described his Michigan State role as broader, with responsibility resembling a general manager's roster-construction function. Those staffing figures are Khalif's account and are consistent with the *Wisconsin State Journal's* November 2021 count of staff titles. The body does not rely on Khalif's more subjective assessments of Wisconsin's internal decision-making.

Football personnel panel. Authors' compilation from official Athletics football staff and season-roster pages, fetched September 24 and 28, 2026. The balanced historical comparison is limited to six public Big Ten programs whose pages list sufficiently complete support staffs in 2019, 2022, and 2025–26 (pages as of September 2026): Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan State, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Full-time recruiting, personnel, scouting, and roster-management titles are counted; graduate assistants, interns, students, volunteers, and department-wide staff are excluded. The six-school median rose from 4.0 in 2019 to 7.0 in 2022 and 7.5 in 2025–26; Wisconsin moved from 4 to 8 to 7. The pages are official season archives as they stand today rather than contemporaneous captures, and directory practices differ across institutions, so total support-staff headcount is not used.

Wisconsin Athletics' revenue structure. Chris McIntosh, written testimony and hearing transcript, U.S. House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Administrative State, Regulatory Reform, and Antitrust, “Antitrust Law and the NCAA: Examining the Current Climate,” March 11, 2025 (“two of our 23 sports generate positive net revenues—football and men's basketball”; those revenues fund “the other 21 varsity sports we sponsor”). Wisconsin Athletics, “An update from Chris McIntosh,” October 22, 2024: UW Athletics plans to maintain its current offering of 23 sports, and the changed economics may lead it to seek increased advertising and sponsorship opportunities and more non-Badger events in its facilities. Wisconsin's FY2025 NCAA MFRS filing reports football revenue of \$113.6 million against total operating revenue of \$197.9 million (57 percent) on that filing's own categories.

Sport portfolios. Iowa Athletics, August 21, 2020 (24 programs; discontinuation of men's gymnastics, men's and women's swimming and diving, and men's tennis, citing approximately \$5 million per year in savings) and February 15, 2021 (women's swimming and diving reinstated; the three men's programs remain discontinued). University of Minnesota, October 9, 2020 (Board of Regents approves discontinuing men's gymnastics, men's tennis, and men's indoor track and field after 2020–21, citing financial challenges and proportional opportunities for male and female student-athletes). Michigan State Athletics, October 22, 2020 (men's and women's swimming and diving discontinued after 2020–21). Michigan Athletics: 29 varsity

teams; June 2020 projected FY2021 deficit with 10 percent salary reductions for senior administrators and head coaches, and 21 positions eliminated in September 2020, with no varsity team discontinued. Oregon Athletics, August 22, 2025 (commitment to Oregon's 20 athletic programs, as the department counts them). Penn State Athletics, February 26, 2026 (31 varsity programs). Purdue Athletics, October 20, 2020 (furloughs, salary reductions, position eliminations, expenditure controls, and an \$18 million More Than A Game campaign, avoiding sport eliminations). None of these sources is used to claim that savings from eliminated sports were transferred to football.

NIL timing. Wisconsin Athletics announced YouDub, its NIL-readiness program built around Opendorse, on June 9, 2021, before the NCAA interim NIL policy took effect July 1. Wisconsin partnered with Altius Sports Partners on April 7, 2022 and launched the YouDub Marketplace on April 21. On August 30, 2022, Wisconsin formally named Brian Mason Director of NIL Strategy and Bianca Miceli Assistant Director of NIL and Community Outreach; the announcement stated that Mason had co-lead YouDub's development and initial rollout culminating in its June 2021 launch. Varsity Collective preliminary activity began in June 2022 and its formal public launch was September 9, 2022; the fourteen-month figure uses the formal public launch. At launch it described itself as "the first and only donor- and alumni-led NIL Collective working on behalf of Wisconsin Badgers student-athletes," supported by "one-time gifts and recurring contributions" from alumni, businesses, and fans (The Varsity Collective, launch announcement, PR Newswire, September 9, 2022). By then, most legacy Big Ten peers had operating donor/fan collectives. Northwestern's TrueNU publicly launched in February 2023. EADA and NCAA MFRS capture institutional spending but do not capture most third-party collective NIL activity, so the report treats the formal public launch of a donor/fan collective as an observable timing marker rather than combining collective activity with institutional accounting data.

Second-stage NIL organization. Wisconsin expanded its Altius arrangement in June 2023 to add an on-campus Athlete Marketing Manager, announced that manager in September 2023, and added a Partner Services Manager in February 2024. By 2023–24, UW described its combination of Altius and Learfield NIL roles as unusual nationally. Badger Athlete Partners, launched December 17, 2025, consolidated NIL revenue generation within Badger Sports Properties and added five dedicated positions for deal facilitation and management, content creation, business development, and activation. Ohio State and Learfield launched Buckeye Sports Group on June 9, 2025. The report therefore makes no claim that Wisconsin was uniformly late in campus NIL servicing or commercial support; the timing claim is narrower and strongest for the donor-facing collective.

Athletics leadership and player-market organization. Wisconsin rebuilt the recruiting operation in 2022.

Under head coach Luke Fickell, Max Stienecker became Director of Player Personnel and Casey Rabach Director of Scouting in 2023, with further personnel depth added in 2024. Wisconsin Athletics appointed Marcus Sedberry, then Deputy Athletic Director and Chief Operating Officer, as football general manager on February 17, 2025, overseeing roster management, player personnel, and operations. Wisconsin Athletics announced on June 3, 2026 that Morocco Brown, a 25-year NFL front-office executive most recently with the Indianapolis Colts, had been hired as football general manager to oversee roster management, player personnel, and football operations; Brown succeeded Sedberry, who had become interim athletic director after Chris McIntosh left for a position with the Big Ten Conference. The football staff directory lists separate Directors of Player Personnel for offense and defense; September 2026 reporting added a Senior Director of Personnel Strategy (Marcus Berry) and a Director of Scouting and Player Personnel (Darius Hicks) working under Brown. Wisconsin Athletics announced Shawn Eichorst as Director of Athletics on July 1, 2026. These sources support the descriptive proposition that Wisconsin's football personnel operation expanded and became more specialized over time; they do not establish that any particular organizational structure is optimal.

Roster budgets. Stewart Mandel, David Ubben, Sam Khan Jr., and *The Athletic* Colleges Team, "Does your college football roster cost \$8M or \$50M? Here's our report on 68 teams," *The Athletic/New York Times*, September 16, 2026. *The Athletic* contacted more than 70 people around college football to construct estimated ranges. The measure is the money programs had available to assemble their 2026 rosters, including athletic-department revenue, booster contributions, and other program-controlled sources; independent endorsement income outside program control is excluded. Wisconsin was estimated at \$27–31 million, eighth in the Big Ten on that estimate; Iowa at \$17–21 million. These are reported estimates rather than audited university accounts. The measure is program-controlled resources available for roster assembly rather than total football spending, and it can overlap with direct revenue sharing and booster-supported NIL resources; it is therefore not added to the House revenue-sharing figures or to the three financial facts in Section 3. The estimate is evidence of Wisconsin's current scale in the player market, not of the spending level required to win.

Bonding authority and project delivery. Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, *State Level Debt Issuance*; Wisconsin Constitution art. VIII §7(2)(f); State of Wisconsin Department of Administration, Division of Facilities Development; 2015 Wisconsin Act 55; Wis. Stat. s. 16.855(1g)(f) and (12m); 2023 Wisconsin Act 19; Universities of Wisconsin, *Program Revenue Bonding Process*; UW System Administrative Policies SYS 915 and SYS 920; Wisconsin Statutes chapter 233; peer university debt programs and official statements. UW–Madison projects can be financed with

state-issued “program revenue supported borrowing” repaid from university program revenues, as in 2023 Wisconsin Act 19’s enumeration of the Kellner project, but the State is the issuer. Under the UW program-revenue bonding process, the State sells bonds or notes every four to six months; DOA notifies UW System Administration of an upcoming sale, the proceeds are deposited in the Capital Improvement Fund, and DOA pays contractor and vendor invoices for each UW project from that pool. DOA’s Division of Facilities Development develops and implements the State Building Program for state agencies and the UW System and provides project management, field oversight of construction, and contracts for architecture/engineering services and construction work. UW’s authority to manage its own capital projects, added by 2015 Wisconsin Act 55 and implemented in SYS 915 and SYS 920, is limited to projects funded entirely with gifts and grants; under s. 16.855(12m), the Board of Regents may let such “UW gifts and grants projects” through single prime contracting, outside most of the state’s construction-contracting requirements in s. 16.855. Chapter 233 provides a Wisconsin precedent for delegated borrowing and facilities authority under continuing public oversight: s. 233.03 empowers the University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority to issue bonds under ss. 233.20 to 233.26, to seek financing from the Wisconsin Health and Educational Facilities Authority, to acquire, design, construct, or improve facilities not on state-owned land and to buy, sell, and lease real estate, while facilities on state-owned land remain subject to state approval under s. 16.85(14); s. 233.22 provides that the authority’s bonds are not public debt of the state. These sources support the descriptive claim that borrowing and project-delivery authority for ordinary debt-financed projects are separated from UW–Madison; they do not establish that any particular reform is optimal or that UW would necessarily borrow at a lower interest rate.

Kellner Family Athletic Center. 2023 Wisconsin Act 19; Board of Regents materials; Wisconsin Athletics capital materials. Total project: \$285.163 million, consisting of \$50 million state cash, \$120 million state-issued borrowing repaid by Athletics, and \$115.163 million Athletics program-revenue cash/gifts. Phase one, including the 120-yard indoor field, opened in late August 2026, with the full project projected for completion in 2027. The building also contains the 11,000-square-foot Camp Randall Fitness Center, operated by University Recreation & Wellbeing for student, affiliate, and community members.

The 2002 Camp Randall precedent. In October 2002, the Kellner family gave \$10 million through the University of Wisconsin Foundation: approximately \$6 million for the Camp Randall renovation and \$4 million for academic programming. UW simultaneously reduced the project’s planned cost, expanded suites, club seats, and premium seating as dedicated revenue sources, and adopted a twenty-year Athletics financial plan. Chancellor John Wiley stated that Athletics would make the renovation a reliable, self-supporting

endeavor. The example is used as a Wisconsin precedent for pairing a long-lived Athletics project with philanthropy, dedicated revenue, and a long-run financing plan. Source: UW–Madison News, “Camp Randall renovation back on track,” October 16, 2002.

Act 203 and campus loan. 2025 Wisconsin Act 203; UW System fiscal estimate for SB 1075; Athletic Board reporting. Act 203 created a \$14.6 million annual state appropriation for qualifying Athletics facility debt service. Because GPR already covered some qualifying debt service, the public record does not establish that the full \$14.6 million is net new. The UW System fiscal estimate said the relief would free Athletics program revenue for athlete contracts. The roughly \$20 million interest-free campus loan arose from COVID; about \$4.33 million had been repaid, roughly \$15.67 million remained, and repayments were later paused.

House year. Wisconsin’s first-year House pool is about \$20.5 million. Alston awards are the education-related payments of up to \$5,980 per athlete per year that schools were permitted to make after *NCAA v. Alston* (2021); under the settlement’s implementing rules, up to \$2.5 million of such awards counts against the pool cap. An expected Alston credit of roughly \$2.5 million, the maximum allowed rather than a figure Wisconsin has published, implies about \$18 million in new direct revenue-sharing payments to players. Under the settlement, each participating school may share up to 22 percent of average Autonomy 5 athletic media, ticket, and sponsorship revenue with athletes; for 2025–26 that cap was about \$20.5 million (NCAA, “Settlement Documents Filed in College Athletics Class-Action Lawsuits,” July 26, 2024; NCAA, “DI Board of Directors conditionally approves House settlement-related rules changes,” April 21, 2025). The court granted final approval on June 6, 2025 (*In re College Athlete NIL Litigation*, No. 4:20-cv-03919-CW, N.D. Cal.). Wisconsin’s reported conference/NCAA distributions, media rights, and postseason football revenue rose from \$64.8 million in FY2024 to \$77.9 million in FY2025, and the median for the sixteen public Big Ten programs rose from \$65.5 million to \$79.5 million (Knight-Newhouse/NCAA MFRS, nominal dollars). The cap is set on an Autonomy 5 average rather than on any school’s own revenue, so the media increase and the House cap are related but are not an accounting identity. Third-party NIL and school-specific donor resources are discussed in the roster-budgets note. The operating-spending path, House payments, and Kellner project are not additive and do not measure the same thing; they are different financial obligations with no reason to be financed the same way. Table 1 draws on institutional budget records and board reporting for FY2026 and Knight-Newhouse FY2025 own-source revenue. It uses six public Big Ten programs with little or no material pre-existing recurring university support so the comparison is not driven by institutions that already relied heavily on university subsidy. Michigan’s reported \$15 million of university support is of undisclosed economic form (transfer, loan, or advance); Michigan also reduced its planned payment

back to the university by \$6.1 million. Purdue's three-year commitment was undrawn when reviewed. Nebraska continued sending \$5 million annually to Husker Scholars; Ohio State's \$48 million university loan pre-dates House and arose from pandemic losses.

National Athletics financing. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *College Athletics: Most Programs Spend More Than They Generate in Revenue*, GAO-26-108640 (July 14, 2026; publicly released August 5, 2026). Using NCAA financial data, GAO found that 49 of 69 Power-conference programs spent more than they generated in Athletics revenue in 2023–24, compared with 42 of 65 a decade earlier. The median Power-program gap rose from \$2.7 million to \$15.2 million. College contributions to Power Athletics rose from \$445 million in 2014–15 to \$1.2 billion in 2023–24, increasing from 7 percent to 11 percent of total funding. GAO defines college contributions broadly to include general funds and student fees; general funds can include tuition and other unrestricted resources. These national figures are used as context and are not treated as directly comparable to the Wisconsin support-and-transfer calculation.

FY2025 Wisconsin support baseline. Wisconsin's FY2025 NCAA MFRS filing reports \$7,245,480 of direct institutional support (Category 4), a transfer of the same amount back to the institution (Category 5), \$3,176,379 of direct state support, \$4,247,580 of excess transfers to the institution (Category 50), and no student fees. Netting those reported categories, Athletics was a net contributor of about \$1.07 million; it also reported a \$4.3 million operating surplus. Knight-Newhouse's compilation shows \$10.4 million gross support and \$7.2 million of "Excess Transfers Back" but omits the Category 50 transfer. The \$7.2 million transfer-back is not the same as the separate \$13.3 million 2025–26 Athletics budget payment for athletes' financial aid cited in the July report.

Private support and donor interaction. The literature does not imply a universal substitution rate between Athletics and academic giving. Stinson and Howard (2004) report evidence consistent with substitution in donor behavior, while other work finds positive spillovers. Koo and Dittmore's preliminary 2012 analysis of 29 FBS institutions, reported contemporaneously by *Inside Higher Ed*, found crowd-out and produced the widely quoted \$1.40 estimate. Their later published study, Koo and Dittmore (2014), expanded the sample to 155 Division I, II, and III institutions and instead reported spillover effects of athletic giving on academic giving. Stinson and Howard (2008) likewise find that athletic success increased support for both Athletics and academics at smaller Division I institutions. The paper uses the literature only to establish that Athletics and academic donor markets interact and should not automatically be treated as separate pools. References: Jeffrey L. Stinson and Dennis R. Howard (2004), "Scoreboards vs. Mortarboards: Major Donor Behavior and Intercollegiate Athletics," *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 13(3): 129–140; Gi-Yong Koo and

Stephen W. Dittmore (2014), "Effects of Intercollegiate Athletics on Private Giving in Higher Education," *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* 7: 1–16; Jeffrey L. Stinson and Dennis R. Howard (2008), "Winning Does Matter: Patterns in Private Giving to Athletic and Academic Programs at NCAA Division I-AA and I-AAA Institutions," *Sport Management Review* 11(1): 1–20.

Athletics donor concentration. Wisconsin Athletics, *Donor Impact Report 2025* (SupportTheBadgers.org; donor counts as of December 31, 2025): 13,530 donors gave more than \$64.4 million in 2025, and 74.5 percent of all donations came from 7.28 percent of total donors; the Lead Badger Club (\$100,000 and above), 0.8 percent of donors, gave 49.4 percent. More than 300 donors had committed over \$92 million to the Building Champions Campaign since its October 2023 launch to help fund the new \$285 million athletic center, which Athletics describes as the largest capital project and campaign in its history. These figures establish concentration and simultaneous fundraising demands. Public data do not identify a Wisconsin-specific donor-substitution coefficient.

Academic funding pressure. UW–Madison reported that federal research funding fell 17 percent in 2025. In April 2026, Graduate School data presented to the University Committee showed international applications to master's programs down more than 40 percent from the prior year and admitted international master's students down more than 20 percent. These facts are used only to establish that flexible private support currently has unusually valuable competing academic uses. They do not imply that Athletics caused those pressures or that an Athletics gift would otherwise have supported academics. Sources: UW–Madison Federal Relations, "Federal research funding updates," February 10, 2026; UW–Madison University Committee minutes, April 20, 2026.

Tuition, state support, and flexible university resources. Board of Regents Policy Document 21-7 states that tuition revenue supplements state General Purpose Revenue (GPR) to support core university operations and that both tuition and GPR finance core operating expenses. The Universities of Wisconsin's 2027–29 operating budget request makes the substitution concrete: it proposes freezing resident undergraduate tuition for the biennium provided the State invests \$190 million to support the cost of the freeze and other operating needs that preserve educational quality. Board of Regents Policy Document 21-6 classifies tuition and several other program-revenue categories as unrestricted and gifts and federal and non-federal grants and contracts as restricted. Together, these sources support the structural claim in Section 4: tuition and state operating support help determine the university's flexible financial capacity, while many other large revenue streams cannot simply be redirected to another purpose. The argument does not imply that Wisconsin students currently finance football through an Athletics fee, that restricted research or gift funds can be redirected to Athletics, or that tuition should be

raised to pay athletes. Sources: Board of Regents, Regent Policy Document 21-7, *Policy on the Expenditure of Tuition Revenue and State General Purpose Revenue*; Regent Policy Document 21-6, *Program Revenue Calculation Methodology and Fund Balances Policy*; Universities of Wisconsin, “Universities of Wisconsin announce 4-Year Tuition Pledge as part of 2027-29 budget request proposal,” August 17, 2026, and “Regents approve 2027-29 biennial budget requests,” August 20, 2026.

Athletics, university risk-sharing, and broader institutional capacity. Section 4’s statement that resources can move in both directions uses Wisconsin’s own reported relationship with Athletics: the COVID-era interest-free campus loan (see Act 203 and campus loan) and the FY2025 transfers back to the university (see FY2025 Wisconsin support baseline). Purdue’s undrawn backstop is described in the House year note. These facts do not establish a formal insurance contract; they show that the financial relationship between Athletics and the university can run in both directions over time.

Athletics governance and commercial authority. Wisconsin Athletics already has substantial personnel and commercial authority: Wis. Stat. § 36.115 places UW–Madison employees in a university personnel system separate from the state personnel system under ch. 230, and Athletics uses multiyear employment arrangements, sponsorship and multimedia-rights agreements, licensing arrangements, and a dedicated NIL/commercial operation. A more separate structure would operate under Wisconsin’s affiliate rules: Regent Policy Document 21-10 permits legally distinct associated affiliated organizations but bars university employees from constituting a majority of their boards, and Regent Policy Document 21-9 requires university foundations to maintain legal distance from the institution. Wisconsin has no general statutory grant for a university-owned Athletics operating corporation with the university’s legal identity, of the kind Kentucky used to create Champions Blue LLC, and neither form would itself authorize borrowing against UW or Athletics revenues. These sources establish differences in legal powers and decision rights; they do not establish that any particular structure improves athletic performance, revenue, or continuity across changes in coaches or athletic directors. Sources: Wis. Stat. § 36.115; Regent Policy Documents 21-9 and 21-10; Legislative Audit Bureau Report 18-4 (the Regents tightened affiliate rules following the LAB review; the employee-majority limitation is the Board’s chosen rule); Wis. Stat. § 36.11(12)(a); *Wisconsin Citizens Concerned for Cranes and Doves v. DNR*, 2004 WI 40, ¶14; University of Kentucky Board of Trustees, PR 6 (April 25, 2025); KRS 164A.610.

Athletics-specific and university-level borrowing. The University Athletic Association, Inc., a direct-support organization of the University of Florida, carries its own bond debt: \$134.9 million of long-term debt outstanding at June 30, 2025, including the current

portion, with bond covenants tested against the Association’s net revenues. Florida State’s \$306.335 million 2024 Athletics Association Revenue Bonds were issued through the Florida Division of Bond Finance for the Board of Governors and are secured by specified Athletics Department and Seminole Boosters revenues; they are not general obligations of FSU or the State. The Florida Board of Governors’ ratings summary as of February 27, 2026 lists the Athletics Association credit at Aa3/AA– (Moody’s/Fitch), below FSU’s Aa1/AA+ issuer rating and the Aa2/AA ratings on several broader FSU revenue credits, such as its housing and parking bonds. The comparison does not establish that the narrower pledge alone causes the rating gap: pledge breadth, revenue volatility, covenants, reserves, maturity, and the relationship to the university all matter.

University-level financing provides a different model. In January 2008, the University of Michigan Regents authorized General Revenue Bonds, supported by a pledge of the university’s general revenues, for projects that included the Michigan Stadium renovation and expansion; the university had announced in June 2007 that the \$226 million project would be funded through private donations and Athletic Department resources, primarily revenue from the new seating. Penn State’s Beaver Stadium renovation provides an especially clear example of a different borrower/payer combination: the university uses bond financing while Intercollegiate Athletics is responsible for repayment and the project is not funded with tuition dollars or the educational budget. These examples are used only to show that the identity of the borrower and the identity of the ultimate payer are separate choices. Sources: University Athletic Association, Inc., *Financial Statements 2024–2025*; State of Florida Division of Bond Finance, Official Statement, Florida State University Athletics Association Revenue Bonds, Series 2024A and 2024B (June 11, 2024); Florida Board of Governors, *Bond Ratings, State University System of Florida* (as of February 27, 2026); University of Michigan Board of Regents, “Refinancing of a Portion of the Commercial Paper and Financing of New Projects” (Request for Action, January 2008); Michigan Athletics, “Board Gives Final Approval of Stadium Expansion Project” (June 21, 2007); Penn State News, “Board committee advances initial expenditure for Beaver Stadium renovation” (May 4, 2023) and “Trustees approve Beaver Stadium renovation plans” (May 21, 2024).

Federal policy at publication. On September 28, 2026, the U.S. Senate passed S.4668, the Protect College Sports Act of 2026, as amended, by a vote of 77–22. At publication, the bill had not become law and still required House action. If enacted, the amended proposal could alter several features of the player market, including the scope of permissible institutional athlete compensation. This report analyzes the rules and financing arrangements in effect at the time of publication. Source: U.S. Senate Roll Call Vote No. 250, 119th Congress, 2nd Session (September 28, 2026).