



Woelk: Time for CU to consider increasing student fee

By Neill Woelk
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BOULDER, Colo. — As the current economic conditions continue to put the squeeze on college athletic departments, it's time for University of Colorado officials to at least consider taking a step they've avoided for far too long.

Increase the student athletic fee.

Understand that this is a third-rail issue at CU. When first instituted in the wake of the athletic department's near-meltdown in 1980, students protested vehemently. Originally approved by the Board of Regents as a "temporary" addition to student fees, it quickly became a permanent fixture.

But at least the fee has remained basically the same since its inception. While the tuition costs -- in-state and out-of-state -- as well as other mandatory fees have risen dramatically in the last three decades, the student athletic fee remains at \$57 per year.

Consider this: when the fee was instituted in 1980, in-state tuition was roughly \$800 per year and out-of-state students were paying about \$3,500.

Next fall, in-state students will pay \$6,153 in tuition to attend CU for a year while out-of-state students will write a check for \$26,675.

That means a fee that was once equal to about 7 percent of in-state tuition is now equal to less than 1 percent of in-state tuition.

Still, an increase is not something CU regents want to consider (although the regents somehow found the courage to significantly increase tuition costs in each of the last three years).

Neither is it something CU athletic director Mike Bohn is eager to discuss. A Boulder native, he's well-aware of the possible firestorm such a move might ignite.

But as the cost of maintaining an athletic department continues to rise, it's something that needs to be strongly considered.

Ironically, one of the biggest increases the department will face this year comes as a direct result of the tuition increases. The athletic department's scholarship costs last year surpassed \$8 million for the first time; the most-recent increases will add an estimated \$400,000 to the bill.

The athletic fee is a tiny portion of the grand total of mandatory fees the average CU student must pay. For instance, students next fall will be required to pay a \$144 RTD student bus pass fee (even if they

never, ever ride the bus), a \$400 capital construction fee and almost \$700 in student activity fees.

Those activity fees include such costs as \$20 per year for "arts and cultural enrichment," another \$15 to "promote cultural awareness," and \$25 to "encourage environmental involvement of the campus community."

There's also a \$175 yearly charge for the student recreation center.

Understand, all those fees are mandatory. Don't have time to use the rec center? You still pay. Not interested in "encouraging environmental involvement of the campus community"? You still pay. Ditto for those kids who aren't interested in "cultural enrichment," and don't forget to line the pockets of RTD even if you live across the street from campus.

Certainly the athletic department can be seen in the same vein. By no means are all 29,000 students at CU interested in athletics -- but CU regularly sells all 12,000 of its student football season tickets. That's at least an indication of relatively strong interest -- and we'd love to know about any "cultural enrichment" events that attract 12,000 students on a regular basis.

We'll also argue that CU's athletic department provides ancillary benefits to every student, even those who never, ever attend an event.

College athletics are a tremendous marketing tool. When a team or individual wins (hello, Jenny Barringer), it provides positive exposure for the entire school. Success breeds success. It's no coincidence that the list of top-ranked public universities in the nation every year closely mirrors the list of the most successful athletic departments.

And the fees? Student fees at CU are similar to taxes. Everyone pays them, and you choose what you use.

Certainly, CU's student athletic fee is relatively inexpensive compared to other places.

Just up the road in Fort Collins, CSU students pay \$177 per year for an athletic fee. At CSU, student football tickets are free -- but the combined cost of CU's athletic fee and a season football ticket (\$160) is still less than the fee paid by every CSU student.

Then there's North Carolina, where every student pays \$255 per year. Again, tickets are free -- but the total cost is still far more than the bill for CU students who pay the student fee and buy tickets.

We're not advocating a huge increase in CU's student fee.

But an increase of even \$20 per year (\$10 per semester) would at least offset the bump the athletic department will face because of the tuition increase.

Certainly it would not be a popular move. Tax increases never are.

But after three decades of the fee remaining static, an increase is something CU officials should strongly consider. It would at least allow its athletic department to keep pace with the tuition increases the regents continue to impose.



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