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Here Are the Hottest College Sports — and the Ones in Decline

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Citing budget woes, officials at Eastern Michigan University [announced plans last week](#) to cut four of the institution's sports teams: women's softball, women's tennis, men's swimming and diving, and men's wrestling.

The decision has drawn consternation — and pleas for support — from on and off campus. Members of the men's swimming-and-diving team are [seeking \\$90,000 in online donations](#) to save the program. A group of students has planned a sit-in at the president's office on Wednesday. And a local coach of high-school football and wrestling has said university athletics officials [are no longer welcome](#) to visit his program.

In choosing to eliminate teams like women's tennis and men's wrestling, Eastern Michigan is swimming with the tide. Over the course of the last decade, colleges' athletics departments at all levels have dropped those and other sports in decline. *The Chronicle* reviewed participation data from the U.S. Department of Education to examine which sports were in the ascent and which have been commonly dropped. The data demonstrate how colleges are shifting their priorities to meet the evolving interests of potential students. Here are a few key takeaways from the

analysis:

Change for Swimming and Track Teams

Since 2008, colleges at the Division I level and below have substantially reduced their spending on the sports Eastern Michigan targeted for elimination. In 2017, 109 Division I institutions had men's swimming-and-diving teams, according to the Education Department data. Nearly a decade earlier, there were 128 such programs at the Division I level — a loss of 19 teams. Women's swimming-and-diving teams saw similar declines, with 16 fewer Division I programs in 2017 than a decade earlier.

Across all tiers of college sports, swimming-and-diving teams have suffered the most eliminations, with 52 fewer men's teams during the 2016-17 academic year than a decade prior, and 31 fewer women's teams.

But colleges haven't abandoned the pool. While swimming-and-diving programs have been cut, the growth of squads classified simply as swimming teams has dwarfed those eliminations. Over the last decade, men's swimming programs have risen by 91, women's programs by 77.

Track-and-field teams have followed a similar pattern. While the popularity of combined track-and-field programs has diminished in the last decade, programs in more-specific categories — indoor and outdoor track and field teams, as well as cross country — have seen sharp gains.

Trouble for Tennis and Wrestling

No such silver lining exists for tennis, however. Both at the Division I level and overall, there are fewer men's and women's tennis teams than there were 10 years ago. Nationwide there are 26 fewer men's teams and 13 fewer women's.

Cost could explain the sport's lack of enduring popularity at the youth and college level. In 2011, Doug MacCurdy, a former official with the United States Tennis Association, told *The New York Times* that the price of high-class training for junior players could run as high as \$30,000 a year, "and some people, obviously, much more."

Men's wrestling, also on Eastern Michigan's hit list, has suffered as well. At the Division I level, there were 12 fewer such programs in 2017 than a decade earlier.

2 Sports on the Rise: Lacrosse and Beach Volleyball

As America's high-school students [embrace lacrosse](#), so too have colleges. No sector has cashed in on high schoolers' desire to prolong their careers in the sport like private, nonprofit, four-year colleges. Of the 383 men's and women's lacrosse teams that have been created over the last decade, more than four in five were established at private, four-year institutions. At colleges in the Midwest, for example, [a lacrosse team](#) can be an important [recruiting tool](#) in a competitive admissions environment.

On the Division I level, the only sport to outpace lacrosse's growth has been women's beach volleyball. In 2008 there were no Division I beach-volleyball teams, and only four teams altogether, all at Puerto Rican universities. Today there are 53 women's

beach-volleyball teams in Division I, and 101 women's beach-volleyball teams nationally. Compared with many sports, beach volleyball has a strong regional flavor. California institutions host the most women's beach-volleyball teams — 45 — followed by Florida and Puerto Rico, with nine teams each.

Community Colleges and ‘Other Sports’

At public two-year colleges the elimination of certain athletic teams doesn't appear to be consistently related to the sports' national reputations but seemingly to the financial stresses facing the sector. Those colleges have stepped back from sports more broadly, with fewer men's baseball, men's and women's golf, and men's and women's basketball teams than a decade ago.

The tables accompanying this article provide figures for “Other Sports.” They include acrobatics and tumbling, competitive cheerleading, competitive dancing, shotgun shooting, and sprint (or lightweight) football, among other lesser-known intercollegiate athletic pursuits.