

RUTGERS

A FISCAL AND ACADEMIC CASE STUDY

A Multi-Year Financial and Competitive Plan for Rutgers Athletics

My independent evaluation of athletic finance, revenue development, student protection, institutional accountability, and long-term competitive sustainability.

JOHN O'HARA EVERED

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH PROJECT

Executive Summary

\$193.8M FY2025 EXPENSES	\$47.2M REPORTED SHORTFALL	\$15.8M STUDENT-FEE SUPPORT	\$516.9M CUMULATIVE DEFICIT
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Key figures reflect Rutgers' fiscal-year 2025 reporting and the cited public summaries.

Rutgers Athletics does not have a small budgeting problem; it has a structural financial and management problem. In fiscal year 2025, the department reported \$193.8 million in expenses and \$146.6 million in total operating revenue. The resulting operating shortfall was about \$47.2 million even after the revenue side included \$15.8 million from student fees, \$7 million from the university general budget, and \$8 million in state support.

Removing those support sources produces the widely reported deficit figure of roughly \$78 million. Since Rutgers joined the Big Ten, cumulative athletics deficits have reached approximately \$516.9 million (Steinbach, 2026). My answer is not another student charge and it is definitely not another renovation. Rutgers already has what a turnaround should need: more than 617,000 living alumni, the largest media market in the country, Big Ten membership, a football stadium that operated near 93 percent of listed capacity in 2025, real campus traditions, and an enormous number of corporations throughout New Jersey and New York. Rutgers does not lack assets. It has failed to convert those assets into enough dependable revenue. Too few alumni become recurring donors, valuable commercial inventory sits unsold, losing programs carry coaching costs that do not match their results, and new facility obligations have been accepted before the old ones were cleared.

My proposal sets two clocks. The first is a three-year revenue turnaround. Direct athletics contributions rise from about \$8.1 million to a stretch target of \$36 million, supported by 50,000 recurring donors. Sponsorship, advertising, licensing, and royalty revenue rises from \$2.68 million to \$18 million.

Coaching compensation falls from \$46.1 million into a controlled range of \$35 million to \$39 million, with \$35 million preferred. The second clock is a multi-year debt and discipline plan. Nonessential construction stops. Scheduled facility debt payments continue. Every annual surplus is divided with 75 percent applied as additional principal, 15 percent placed under the authority of an earned-seat reinvestment board, and 10 percent held as liquid emergency cash.

I made this plan aggressive on purpose. The \$15.8 million student fee contribution comes out of the first turnaround budget. That does not magically create a surplus, and I will not pretend it does. Replacing that money is the first public proof that Rutgers means change. The rest has to come from donations, corporate sales, attendance, merchandise, media value, smarter contracts, and better purchasing.

Some targets may be missed. If we fail, we fail. Rutgers should disclose the failure, identify who owned the target, correct the plan, and keep the cost away from students.

MY POSITION

This is an independent research project built around one basic belief: Rutgers does not have to choose between caring about students and caring about winning. I am not asking the school to lower its ambition. I am saying that spending money by itself is not ambition and a large contract is not proof of progress. Rutgers can compete while being completely honest about what it can afford, what it has failed to sell, and who is responsible for fixing it. Make the numbers public. Move quickly. Reward results. Restructure what is losing. Protect what athletes and students actually need. If we fail, we fail, but do not hide it, and do not send the bill back to students.

1. The Financial Problem Is Also a Management Problem

Table 1. Fiscal-year 2025 financial snapshot

MEASURE	REPORTED AMOUNT	WHY IT MATTERS
Total athletics expense	\$193.8 million	Spending increased faster than self-generated revenue.
Total operating revenue	\$146.6 million	Includes institutional, state, and student support.
Operating shortfall	\$47.2 million	Gap remaining after reported support revenue.
Student-fee contribution	\$15.8 million	Mandatory support targeted for immediate removal.
Coaching compensation	\$46.1 million	Largest controllable compensation category.
Facility-debt expense	\$14.4 million	Annual expense; outstanding principal is not disclosed.
Direct contributions	\$8.1 million	Far below public conference-comparison levels.
Commercial revenue	\$2.68 million	Sponsorships, advertising, licensing, and royalties.

Sources: Rutgers fiscal reporting summarized by NJ Advance Media and Athletic Business; Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database.

The commercial collapse is especially revealing. Rutgers reported approximately \$8.63 million from royalties, licensing, advertising, and sponsorships in fiscal year 2024, then only \$2.68 million in fiscal year 2025. That is a decrease of about \$5.95 million, or 69 percent. Athletic director Keli Zinn attributed the weakness to inventory that already existed but had not been sold, along with a brand and marketing strategy that needed to become more attractive to corporations (Sargeant, 2026). This is not evidence that New Jersey lacks companies or consumers. It is evidence that Rutgers failed to package and sell what it already controlled.

That is why I treat revenue generation as somebody's job, not something Rutgers should hope winning eventually fixes. Winning will help, and programs that win should earn more because winning creates more media and commercial value. But even during an average season, a serious department should be selling advertising, converting alumni into donors, moving merchandise, and building partnerships.

Rutgers cannot blame every financial hole on the scoreboard.

2. Replace Mandatory Support With Voluntary Alumni Participation

Rutgers reported 33,400 university-wide donors in fiscal year 2024 against more than 617,000 living alumni (Rutgers University, n.d.). That produces about 5.4 donors for every 100 living alumni, although the donor figure includes some non-alumni and does not isolate athletics. Rutgers has not published a comparable verified fiscal year 2025 unique donor count. The missing number should itself be corrected through the transparency program.

My athletics goal is 50,000 active recurring donors within three years. This is deliberately more ambitious than the most recently reported total donor count for the entire university. At an average of \$25 per month, 50,000 recurring donors would generate \$15 million per year. The remainder of the \$36 million contribution target would come from major alumni gifts, corporate matching, and one-time campaigns.

Table 2. Year 3 contribution targets

CONTRIBUTION SOURCE	YEAR 3 TARGET	OPERATING LOGIC
Recurring donations	\$15 million	50,000 active donors averaging \$25 per month.
Major alumni gifts	\$13 million	Large gifts supported by visible impact reporting.
Corporate matching	\$5 million	Employers match alumni and campaign gifts.
One-time campaigns	\$3 million	Giving Days, rivalry pushes, and urgent needs.
Total	\$36 million	Stretch target near the public Big Ten comparison level.

Commercial revenue is excluded from charitable contributions.

One Donation Door

Rutgers should replace the maze of funds, deadlines, phone calls and point rules with one mobile-first donation page. A donor enters any amount, chooses one-time or monthly, and pays through a card, bank transfer or common digital wallet. The default gift supports the area Rutgers determines is most urgent. Scholarship support remains an available choice, including partial, full annual, multiyear, and endowed scholarships. Rutgers selects recipients and donors receive no authority over admissions, playing time, or roster decisions.

Every active recurring donor receives a Scarlet Impact Receipt each quarter. It shows where the donor pool was allocated and what that pool accomplished. Rutgers must not pretend that one particular \$25 payment bought one particular meal when funds were pooled. It can honestly report that a donor's contribution entered the nutrition pool and that the pool funded a stated number of meals. Updates stop when recurring giving stops, except for a final summary and a later, clearly identified request for renewed help.

A scholarship donor contributing more than \$100,000 receives an annual opportunity to meet scholarship recipients in a professional setting, a handwritten letter from a participating recipient, a handwritten acknowledgment from athletics leadership, and a personalized impact report. The point is real gratitude, not printed mass correspondence.

3. Rebuild Commercial Revenue Without Locking Rutgers Into Weak Deals

I recommend that Rutgers target \$18 million in annual sponsorship, advertising, licensing, and royalty revenue by Year 3. I would set the path at \$7 million in Year 1, \$12 million in Year 2 and \$18 million in Year 3. That is aggressive, but it is not made up. Fiscal year 2025 peers reported \$11.28 million at Indiana, \$14.24 million at Michigan State, and \$25.11 million at Penn State (Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database, n.d.). Rutgers is in the same conference and sits inside a stronger corporate market than many of them. It needs to start acting like it.

Corporate agreements should use a guaranteed annual net payment plus incentive payments. Net means the amount Rutgers retains after commissions, fees, and applicable taxes. Incentives can be tied to tickets sold, gate scans, football and basketball attendance, online merchandise sales, digital audience, and agreed advertising value. Actual gate scans receive more weight than tickets distributed because a full venue creates concessions, atmosphere, and stronger television inventory.

Rutgers should avoid long fixed prices. A normal agreement can use a two-year base term, an optional third year, annual market review and a reopening clause when commercial value moves beyond an agreed threshold. Category exclusivity is acceptable. A banking partner can be the official bank, but it should not control unrelated categories. No automatic renewals should prevent a competitive bid when the term ends.

Sell the Empty Shelf

Unsold advertising is not an asset once the season ends. It is nothing. Rutgers should stop protecting an imaginary price and sell the rest of the shelf at a steep enough discount to move it. Inventory remaining 90 days before the season can receive a 15 to 25 percent introductory discount. Inventory left 30 days before the season can receive a 25 to 40 percent discount or be bundled with digital posts and tailgate exposure. Every discounted deal lasts one season so Rutgers can raise the price when the product proves itself.

New Jersey businesses should receive a separate tier from approximately \$5,000 to \$25,000. Restaurants, dealerships, gyms, medical practices, and regional employers can purchase practical packages while premium inventory remains available for larger corporations. The strategy broadens the sponsor base and reduces dependence on one company.

4. Attendance Must Begin Before Kickoff

Rutgers should guarantee a \$100 football student season pass and a \$100 combined men's and women's basketball pass for all three turnaround years. Students can purchase both for \$200. All other varsity sports remain free to students. Student sections in football and basketball expand by 30 percent through reallocation of weak-demand public inventory, not construction. When student capacity is reached, Rutgers uses a waitlist.

A student may transfer or privately resell a ticket only to another verified Rutgers student. Rutgers verifies eligibility but does not police the private price. Students who will not attend must release the ticket at least 24 hours before the event. Repeated failure to attend or release temporarily reduces priority for the next high-demand game.

The main attendance measure is not the announced crowd. Rutgers reports tickets sold, total gate scans, and the percentage of eventual attendees scanned before kickoff or tipoff. The minimum target is 90 percent before the event begins, with 95 percent as the three-year stretch target. Corporate attendance incentives use a 40 percent weight for tickets sold and 60 percent for verified scans.

Make the Tailgate Part of the Product

Rutgers already allows tailgating in stadium lots, Johnson Park and the Jersey Mike's Arena area, with lots generally opening five hours before kickoff (Rutgers University Athletics, 2023). The university does not need a permanent tailgate building. It needs a nearby temporary commons with broad areas for Greek life, general students, clubs, and alumni. Fraternities and sororities manage their own brotherhood and sisterhood gatherings. Other groups arrive, set up, clean up, and leave.

Corporations can sponsor Greek life and club events through approved agreements. Organization-specific sponsorship revenue is split 50 percent to the participating organization and 50 percent to Rutgers Athletics. That gives student groups a reason to build memorable events and creates alumni who associate Rutgers with a positive experience. The university remains strict about safety and identifiable underage alcohol consumption, while remaining lenient about normal humor, costumes, and creative expression.

Students who already run campus meme pages, sports pages and social accounts should document the atmosphere. Rutgers gives them access and quick repost permission, not a corporate script. Content ends about 45 minutes before kickoff and transitions into a visible movement toward the stadium. The objective is an authentic Rutgers tradition that spreads socially and still puts people in their seats on time.

5. Put Athletes and Students Inside the Commercial Model

Rutgers should create a student-athlete merchandise affiliate program. A participating athlete receives a unique link or code for the official team store. Twenty percent of net attributable revenue goes to athletes. Fifteen percent goes directly to the athlete who generated the sale and 5 percent enters a team pool shared among participating teammates. The structure rewards individual effort while giving less visible players a benefit. Payment must reflect real promotional work and comply with then-current NIL, revenue-sharing and fair-market-value rules (NCAA, n.d.). Offseason content should expand sharply for athletes who voluntarily train in campus facilities.

Paid work-study students and students completing required academic internships can film, edit, and publish summer workout content. They receive verified resume experience, portfolio access, and professional relationships. Players control personal content and its revenue. Content posted on an official Rutgers account receives a quick review for safety, privacy, compliance, accuracy, and branding.

The program increases player visibility, recruiting appeal, social reach, and merchandise conversion without building another expensive production department. Rutgers should report output, views, engagement, follower growth, merchandise sales, and compensation paid to athletes.

6. Restructure Spending Without Removing Necessary Care

Coaching Contracts

NJ Advance Media's summary of Rutgers' fiscal year 2025 filing reported approximately \$46.1 million in coaching compensation. My target range is \$35 million to \$39 million, with \$35 million preferred. I estimate that this would create annual savings of about \$7.1 million to \$11.1 million. I would pursue that reduction through contract restructuring, not the elimination of necessary teams or coaching functions.

Standard head coaching agreements use two-year initial terms, controlled guarantees, a predetermined buyout after Year 1 and no automatic extension. Coaches with multiple losing records who earn at or above the comparable conference median must renegotiate below that median, with a minimum 25 percent reduction in guaranteed compensation, or be replaced at the least expensive responsible contract point. A coach who remains can earn compensation back through winning, postseason achievement, and verified growth in donations. Donation bonuses use collected net-new gifts and retention, not verbal pledges.

Rutgers should recruit emerging, upwardly mobile coaches with strong teaching and development records. The policy must not use age as an employment criterion. The objective is new thinking, lower guarantees, and clear upside for results.

Administration and Athlete Services

I would manage the approximately \$31 million administration and support figure reported by NJ Advance Media inside a \$30 million to \$33 million range, but I would never use that range as an excuse to cut necessary care. Medical care, sports medicine, mental health, academic support, nutrition, legal and NCAA compliance, Title IX obligations, security, and athlete safety get handled first. The cuts come from duplicated executive layers, outside consultants, inefficient contracts, and jobs nobody can explain with a measurable responsibility. Keep the people who care, care, care and do necessary work. Clear out the bad energy and the layers that exist only because nobody has challenged them.

Travel, Lodging, and Nutrition

NJ Advance Media's summary reported approximately \$13.5 million in team travel. Airlines, secure hotels and charter buses should compete by state and travel region. Bids are evaluated using 40 percent cost; 25 percent safety; 20 percent reliability and cancellation performance; and 15 percent athlete recovery and service quality.

No vendor receives a university-wide monopoly. Team lodging uses dedicated floors or controlled hotel sections, restricted meeting spaces and separation from opposing fans when reasonably possible. The approximately \$8.4 million student-athlete meal figure reported by NJ Advance Media remains protected. Savings come from partnerships with New Jersey producers, grocers, and restaurants, competitive purchasing and meal reservations that reduce waste.

Nutrition staff retain final approval. Safe, unused food is donated through community organizations, with meals served, cost per meal, waste, and donations reported quarterly.

Scholarships

The approximately \$23.1 million scholarship-aid figure reported by NJ Advance Media remains fully protected. Rutgers should allow donors to fund partial, full annual, multiyear, and endowed scholarships. Current-use gifts provide immediate relief. Endowments build long-term stability but require significant principal. At a 4.5 percent annual distribution, a \$1 million endowment supports about \$45,000 per year. New scholarship expansion occurs only when external funding is secured and roster and gender-equity obligations are satisfied.

7. Stop Optional Construction and Pay Principal

My rule is simple: no new athletics construction until the existing facility obligations are gone. I do not want a smart rollover. I want the debt eliminated and a real surplus created. Major repairs happen only when safety, structural failure, legal compliance, or essential operations make them borderline dire. A donor or corporate project can move forward only when both construction and future maintenance are fully funded without university borrowing. A donated building that leaves Rutgers with decades of maintenance is not free.

The approximately \$14.4 million facilities-debt expense reported by NJ Advance Media is an annual expense, not a public statement of outstanding principal. Rutgers must publish the loan-by-loan principal, interest rate, maturity, annual payment, and counterparty before anyone can validate a multi-year payoff date. My plan does not treat the \$516.9 million cumulative deficit as one facility loan. I target actual facility debt and internal facility obligations while separately reducing the operating deficit.

My surplus rule is simple: Scheduled facility payments continue in the operating budget. On top of those payments, 75 percent of every genuine annual surplus goes to facility debt principal, 15 percent goes to board-directed athletics or campus reinvestment, and 10 percent remains liquid for emergencies.

Figure 1. Surplus allocation under the multi-year plan



The 10 percent reserve can be used only for dire repairs, safety requirements, or unexpected revenue disruption. The 15 percent reinvestment share can support athletics or the wider campus. Every board vote and allocation is published. I designed this structure to attack debt without leaving Rutgers one emergency away from new borrowing.

8. Governance Built Around Care and Public Pressure

The reinvestment board should not be filled automatically by titles or purchased through donations. Candidates submit public video and written applications explaining why they care about Rutgers, identifying one change they would pursue, describing their relevant experience, and disclosing all conflicts. A rotating group of existing Rutgers faculty evaluates applications. Any evaluator who personally, professionally, or financially knows a candidate is excluded from discussing or scoring that person. There is no public popularity vote.

Board members serve limited terms, publish their votes, and can be removed for poor attendance, undisclosed conflicts, or failure to perform. The governing idea is simple. Seats should go to motivated professionals and community members who care about the school and its students enough to do the work.

The standard for service is care, care, care, reinforced by competence. Energy alone is not enough, but credentials without commitment are not enough either. Rutgers needs people who will read the numbers, ask difficult questions and still remember that every decision eventually reaches a student, athlete, employee, or family.

Senior athletics executives do not need another bonus formula. They need direct public attention. I recommend that Rutgers identify each executive's responsibilities, publish a monthly dashboard, hold quarterly financial briefings, accept direct media questions, and record eligible meetings. When a target is missed, the responsible office explains the miss, the response, and the new deadline. Privacy is limited to information protected by law, donor-anonymity requests, and student welfare. Poor results are not private information.

9. Implementation and Financial Test

Table 3. Implementation sequence and public accountability tests

PERIOD	REQUIRED ACTIONS	PUBLIC TEST
First 100 days	Remove the student-fee allocation; freeze optional construction; publish the debt schedule and commercial inventory; launch one donation page.	Can Rutgers show what it owes, what it owns, and who is responsible?
Year 1	Reach \$16 million in contributions and \$7 million in commercial revenue; move coaching costs to \$39 million or below; launch student passes, impact receipts, and discounted inventory sales.	Have new revenue and coaching reforms replaced at least \$15.8 million in student support?
Year 2	Reach \$25 million in contributions and \$12 million in commercial revenue; expand student sections and recurring-donor conversion; apply the surplus formula.	Is the operating gap shrinking without new student support or optional debt?
Year 3	Reach \$36 million in contributions, 50,000 recurring donors, and \$18 million in commercial revenue; maintain coaching-cost and attendance targets.	Has Rutgers built repeatable revenue rather than relying on one exceptional campaign?
Year 4 and beyond	Hold revenue gains, produce annual surpluses, and accelerate principal payments through the 75 percent rule.	Is facility principal falling according to the published multi-year schedule?

The Arithmetic

By Year 3, increasing contributions from \$8.1 million to \$36 million adds about \$27.9 million. Increasing the commercial category from \$2.68 million to \$18 million adds about \$15.3 million. Reducing coaching compensation creates about \$7.1 million to \$11.1 million in savings.

Together, those three core changes improve the annual position by roughly \$50.3 million to \$54.3 million before additional ticketing, merchandise, attendance, procurement or media gains. That improvement is enough to replace the \$15.8 million student fee contribution and close the reported \$47.2 million operating shortfall on

paper, but only if targets are achieved and new costs do not consume the gain. It does not automatically repay the cumulative historical deficit.

It also does not account for every new athlete revenue-sharing obligation. Rutgers must update the model annually and disclose any category reclassification. A target is not cash until it is collected.

Conclusion: If You Read One Section, Read This

Rutgers Athletics should not ask students for another mandatory dollar while sponsorship inventory remains unsold, one of the largest alumni bases in the country remains underused and coaches with repeated losing records receive conference level guarantees. That is not a student problem. It is a leadership problem. Rutgers can be competitive and disciplined at the same time. Protect scholarships, medicine, nutrition, mental health, safety, and academic support.

Restructure expensive losing contracts. Demand clearer results from the people in charge. The first act of credibility is removing the \$15.8 million student fee contribution from the next athletics budget. The second is publishing the debt, contracts, donor counts, commercial inventory, and missed goals. The third is building revenue that people choose to provide: monthly alumni gifts, major scholarships, corporate agreements, full student sections, merchandise sales, and a game-day culture worth sharing.

I cannot guarantee that Rutgers will reach \$36 million in contributions, 50,000 recurring donors, or \$18 million in commercial revenue within three years. They are stretch goals because the current pace is not good enough. I want them to force real movement and pump new blood into the department. If Rutgers fails, everybody should be able to see the failure. If it succeeds, 75 percent of every surplus attacks facility principal until debt no longer controls the future, 15 percent goes to a transparent reinvestment vote, and 10 percent stays liquid exactly where it belongs. The standard is not perfection.

The standard is proving that Rutgers cares enough about its students to change how it operates.

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