

Why UM System leaders established a Mizzou athletics oversight committee

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Behind the story: The spring of 2024 was a strange one within Mizzou's athletics department. It reported a \$1 surplus in a budgetary filing to the NCAA. The athletic director resigned suddenly to take a lesser job. The university's administrative board established a new committee to oversee the athletic department more closely, but wouldn't say why — until I ventured out to one of their meetings to ask, point blank.

Full text: ROLLA, Mo. — The push to create an administration-level university committee focused on the oversight of Mizzou athletics stemmed from concern over athletics department spending and broader trends within college sports, two of the group's members said Thursday.

The UM System Board of Curators' Mizzou Intercollegiate Athletics Special Committee has generated more questions than answers since its February inception, which came just days before the abrupt departure of former athletics director Desiree Reed-Francois.

The committee's charter suggests it can oversee a wide range of athletics department matters, from finances and facilities renovations — including the \$250 million redevelopment of Memorial Stadium's north concourse that was approved Thursday — to emerging issues affecting college sports.

Speaking publicly about the committee for the first time since its creation, committee chairman Bob Blitz confirmed that a desire to lend heightened attention to finances and stay informed regarding the continued college sports landscape's complexity were behind the decision.

“With the statistics that we saw, we felt in filling our fiduciary duty that it was a must to step in and find out more about what was going on in the athletic department,” Blitz said. “We’re not trying to pick coaches; we’re not trying to do those kind of things. We’re trying to make sure that the athletic department is running in a financially responsible way and doing the best they can, that they have the best methods to raise money. This stadium’s going to cost a lot of money. That’s the reason.”

In the 2023 fiscal year, which ran from July 2022 to June 2023 and was Reed-Francois' last full fiscal period in the big chair, Mizzou's athletics department emerged in the black by a single dollar.

That narrow surplus stemmed, in part, from roughly \$23 million in direct institutional support from the academic and administrative side of MU, up from approximately \$12 million in the prior year.

Missouri athletics brought in record revenues while spending record amounts under Reed-Francois. The need for loans from the university to cover athletics expenses has drawn scrutiny

from some.

In creating the oversight committee, the Board of Curators also felt it was keeping in line with administrative trends around other high-profile athletics programs, Blitz said.

“The boards across the nation, in every university, are taking more interest and more activity in the athletic performance,” he said, “because athletics are becoming so complex with money and (name, image and likeness rights) and the (transfer) portal and the ticket prices and the whole branding of the university. So (across) all boards, it is not unusual that either a special committee is formed or that a liaison is directed to the athletic committee from the board or that the board itself takes it.”

The curators intentionally designated four of their nine members to be part of the athletics oversight committee: Blitz, Chairwoman Robin Wenneker, Todd Graves and Jeff Layman. Those four members tend to be more interested in topics that affect Mizzou athletics than some other board members.

Within the structure of the oversight committee, they can specialize on those issues more — like how the board handles its control of MU Health Care.

“We’ve talked about athletics and how we can elevate that. That’s been a clear goal for us for the last two years,” Wenneker said. “I think we all understand that. But nine of us trying to work on this is, even routinely, is cumbersome, so we took it to four. That allows the committee to be more targeted and monitor — which was a key part of that — how we can move athletics forward. So that coupled with accountability to the state of Missouri, we consider that an important responsibility.”

To date, the oversight committee has met almost entirely in closed-session meetings — two of which are scheduled for Friday and Monday. The topics of those gatherings have not been publicly disclosed.

It’s not clear whether the creation of the oversight committee played a role in Reed-Francois’ decision to leave MU for the same role at Arizona.

In explaining the creation of the committee, Blitz emphasized that it was a heavily deliberated decision that fell in line with normal board practices.

“We don’t do anything on a whim,” he said. “A board is just a policy-making organization. We don’t have specific knowledge. We don’t know how to run an athletic department. We don’t know how to run a hospital. So what we do is we get experts — experts in those fields. We hire them and they give us data so we don’t do anything on a whim. We rely on data.”

Mizzou to enforce former AD’s buyout

Mizzou has been quiet on the status of Reed-Francois’ contract buyout following her February departure. But the MU administration’s attitude showed itself slightly Thursday.

Shortly after Reed-Francois' hiring at Arizona, that school said it expected her to "undertake best efforts to reduce or eliminate any financial buyout (she) may owe to the University of Missouri." Based on the terms of her contract, she's likely to owe Missouri roughly \$3 million for leaving her deal early.

It's not clear whether Reed-Francois has submitted a request to lower or drop her buyout or whether Mizzou would even entertain that idea. But UM System President and MU Chancellor Mun Choi, when asked about the matter, suggested the school would hold firm.

"Nothing to share," Choi said, "but we do have a contract, and we do expect the contract terms to be honored."