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Spending Plenty So Athletes Can Make the Grade

Colleges build lavish centers to help players hold on to their academic eligibility

By BRAD WOLVERTON

The facilities arms race in college sports has a new frontier: academic-services buildings.

Over the past decade, a dozen major college programs have built stand-alone academic centers, most of them for the exclusive use of athletes. At least seven more colleges are planning new buildings or major renovations in coming years. Some facilities are as big as 50,000 square feet — the size of some student unions — and many are as swank and well appointed as any buildings on a campus.

The facilities growth, paid for largely by private donations, is at the center of a spending boom in academic support for athletes, a *Chronicle* survey has found. Since 1997, the budgets for academic services for athletes at more than half of the 73 biggest athletics programs in the country have more than doubled, on average, to more than \$1-million a year. One program spent almost \$3-million in 2007 — an average of more than \$6,000 per athlete.

Spending has surged for several reasons: Competition for players has eased admissions standards in recent years, while the National Collegiate Athletic Association's academic-progress requirements have stiffened. That means it's easier for an athlete to get into college but harder to stay eligible for sports.

Teams that fail to meet minimum academic cutoffs lose scholarships. The pressure has led to academic improprieties in several high-profile programs, raising the stakes everywhere.

Athletics officials and some faculty members say the extra spending and attention have sharpened players' classroom focus and kept more athletes on track to graduate. But others complain that the lavish buildings give athletes an unfair advantage over other students.

"The big question I have is, Are these buildings in any way taking away from resources for other students? And I think they are," says Gwendolyn J. Dugy, executive director of NaspA — Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. "Instead of raising money for these special facilities for athletes, universities could be out raising money for buildings that serve all students."

A Building Binge

A decade ago, players could load up on electives and drift in and out of majors without facing repercussions on the playing field. Many struggled to stay awake through mandatory study halls held after grueling workouts. And in some programs, tutors were available only to athletes who were flunking their classes.

Space for academic services was sparse. Some programs borrowed cafeterias or vacant classrooms in the evenings, while others worked out of dormitory basements. "We had to beg, borrow, and steal from others" to

get enough room, says Colin Howlett, associate director of academic services for athletes at Virginia Tech.

Since then many institutions have gone on a building binge, spurred in part by pressure to recruit the best players. Now at least a dozen major college programs have academic-services buildings bigger than 20,000 square feet. Facilities on two campuses — the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa and Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge — exceed 50,000 square feet.

Every year the bar for excellence seems to rise. Few people figured anyone could top the elegant \$15-million Cox Communications Academic Center for Student Athletes, which LSU opened in 2002. But the next year, Texas A&M University rolled out the \$27-million Alice and Erle Nye '59 Academic Center inside its football complex. The Nye center is so spacious, an A&M Web site says, all 600 Aggie athletes could use it at the same time.

But the biggest jaw-dropper, at least so far, belongs to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, whose Stephen M. Ross Academic Center opened in 2006. The three-story glass-and-steel structure, named for the New York real-estate developer and Michigan alumnus, has the look and feel of a modern corporate campus.

The University of Oregon's plans may top them all. It recently started clearing space for a 34,000-square-foot facility set to open in 2010. The three-story building is expected to have 37 individual tutoring rooms, a 112-seat lecture hall, and an amenity every aspiring NFL quarterback needs — a reflecting pool.

Philip H. Knight, the billionaire co-founder of Nike, and a Ducks alumnus, is covering construction costs (neither he nor the university will say how much the building will cost). But his gift comes with lots of strings attached. Through a subsidiary, Mr. Knight will control every detail of the building's construction, and his gift stipulates that the university must provide some \$750,000 to fill the facility with the latest computer equipment and \$250,000 annually for upkeep.

Initial plans prohibited ordinary students from using the building. But faculty members pressured university administrators into opening the auditorium to the student body, as well as some classrooms — as long as they are not being used by athletes.

'You Win With People'

Not all the money is flowing to new facilities. Much of it pays the salaries of growing staffs, who make sure athletes are meeting the NCAA's progress-toward-degree requirements to stay eligible.

"It's a pressure-packed job these kids have," says Jon Dever, director of Alabama's academic-support program. "With all the attention they get for how they do in the classroom, we want to make sure we provide them with every opportunity to succeed here."

As more lower-achieving athletes have gotten into college, many programs have ramped up programming and academic services for those students.

Over the past five years, the University of Mississippi has tripled its operating budget and staff size. In 2003 it offered 50 tutoring sessions a week; now it holds 800.

Like many athletics programs, Ole Miss has added full-time "learning specialists" to work with its growing number of athletes with learning disabilities and other students who need additional help. Learning specialists give advice on taking better notes, for example, or improving study habits. Five years ago, learning specialists were rare on most campuses; the Rebels now have four, whose annual salaries total about \$175,000.

Nearly 60 percent of athletes at the University of Oklahoma are "special admits," meaning they did not meet the university's admissions requirements, says Gerald Gurney, senior associate athletic director. That is one

reason the Sooners spent more money last year helping athletes manage their schoolwork — \$2.9-million — than any other respondent to the *Chronicle's* survey.

On average, Oklahoma's academic-services office spends \$6,213 per student on its 470 athletes — almost twice what the program spent 10 years ago.

Campuses with fewer at-risk students are spending more, too. Duke University just opened a \$1.8-million academic-support center inside the Michael W. Krzyzewski Center for Athletic Excellence. The university will not give dollar figures but says the academic-support program's overall operating budget, staff size, and tutoring budget are now five times as great as they were 10 years ago.

Ohio State University, which had one of the country's biggest athletics budgets last year, at \$109-million, has more than quadrupled its academic-services budget since the 1997-98 academic year. This year it plans to spend \$2.3-million helping players with a full-time staff that has nearly doubled in the past two years.

But unlike many big-time programs, the Buckeyes have resisted the facilities arms race. All of its academic services for athletes are housed in the Younkin Success Center, where all students go for counseling and tutoring.

"Woody Hayes said it best," says David Graham, Ohio State's director of student-athlete support services, referring to the famous Buckeye football coach. "You win with people, you don't win with property."

Overzealous Tutors

But as programs have expanded, some veteran academic advisers worry that institutions may lack the controls to prevent academic misconduct.

"When you grow too big too fast, sometimes you don't have the management or monitoring of all the staff that is required," says Phil Hughes, director of academic support for athletics at Kansas State University and past president of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics. "That allows for a tutor who gets too excited or overzealous to go do something stupid."

In the past decade, 25 institutions have committed major NCAA violations involving academic fraud — anything from university employees' writing papers or taking tests for athletes to players' passing courses without actually having gone to class. Among the more recent and high-profile scandals was Florida State University's investigation into cheating in an online course. The case, which involved some 60 athletes, including about two dozen football players who were suspended just before a bowl game last year, led Florida State to put itself on probation for two years. The NCAA could impose a tougher punishment.

All the attention has led many programs to start monitoring their athletes more closely, including helping them choose majors, register for courses, and handle themselves on the road. To prevent them from skipping classes, many athletics departments pay for "class checkers." Texas A&M put \$48,224 into that effort last year.

The University of Tennessee at Knoxville tracks its 500 players as soon as they swipe their student ID's at the door of the 33,000-square-foot Thornton Athletics Student Life Center, a facility restricted to varsity athletes. The electronic-monitoring system helps Volunteers' officials keep tabs on how much time players spend in each part of the building and how productive they are.

"You have to monitor everything, there's so much at stake," says Fernandez West, the program's associate director. "Anything that goes wrong, we get a lot of scrutiny."

Shifting Oversight

Because of the high-stakes scrutiny, institutions are increasingly shifting academic support for athletes away from total control by the athletics departments. Four Big Ten Conference institutions are among those that have adopted dual reporting lines, with academic-services directors answering to both the provost's office and the athletic director.

Other programs, including those at the Universities of Minnesota-Twin Cities, of New Mexico, and at Louisiana State, report solely to an academic official. It's important that faculty members understand the many demands on athletes, says Stacia L. Haynie, vice provost for academic affairs at Louisiana State, who oversees academic services for athletes. "I think that works better when it's coming from the academic side than when athletics try to articulate those concerns."

Other programs have started clamping down on tutors to make sure they don't get too close to players. Michigan State University had five tutors in 1996; now it has 120. To prevent them from doing more than just helping with homework, the university has two-year term limits, says Jim Pignataro, director of student-athlete support services.

"The minute you lose your academic integrity," he says, "you lose everything."

But some critics argue that the real problems start long before an academically ineligible player's name scrolls across the ESPN ticker.

"The problem is, more schools are accepting students that are further and further away from the average student at the institution," says Nathan Tublitz, a professor of biology at the University of Oregon and co-chair of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, a national faculty-led reform group. "They should not be accepting students who cannot do the work."

Many academic-services directors say they would prefer not to take on so many low-performing students. But because their coaches don't want to compete against those players, they often have no choice.

Mr. Tublitz believes that academically deficient athletes should spend time in community colleges to prepare for the rigors of four-year institutions. Other observers are encouraged that stricter new NCAA core-course requirements for entering freshmen, which go into effect this fall, could help keep more at-risk students from being admitted.

George D. Kuh, director of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University at Bloomington and founding director of the National Survey of Student Engagement, says institutions are admitting more students with remedial needs, while some colleges are consolidating student services in one building. But institutions are not spending nearly as much money on facilities or academic services to guide nonathletes through college as they spend on athletes, he says.

"It's hard to imagine that the money being spent on these buildings and services for athletes is proportionate to the task or challenge at hand," he says.

Several faculty members and athletics officials predict that colleges with facilities for the exclusive use of athletes may ultimately have to share some of that space with other students.

That is already happening on some campuses. Since opening the Charlotte G. Lauder Student Development Center, a 33,000-square-foot athlete-tutoring facility, Auburn University's athletics department has opened the center's doors to nonathletes working on projects with players. A number of graduate programs also hold daytime and weekend classes in the building.

"It creates an environment where we're part of the whole ivory tower — we're interacting with students," says Virgil Starks, director of Auburn's academic-services program. "Students get in here and say, Oh it's not the

Taj Mahal, it's work space."

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