

## THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

### ATHLETICS

# LSU Just Unveiled a \$28-Million Football Facility. The Flood-Damaged Library Is Still 'Decrepit.'

By Will Jarvis | JULY 22, 2019

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@LSUfootball

The new football locker room at Louisiana State U.

On Sunday night Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge unveiled a \$28-million renovation of its Football Operations Building, an all-in-one venue with a player's lounge, weight room, training center, and nutritional facility serving prime rib, king crab, and jambalaya. The renovated locker room has lounging pods complete with iPad mounts, charging stations, and ventilated storage drawers.

"This is why you come to LSU," said one LSU football tweet, accompanied by a video of players celebrating the new digs.

These are good days for LSU athletics. Tens of millions of dollars each year pour into the Tiger Athletic Foundation, the department's main fund-raising arm. The football team, a barometer of any major university's athletic achievement, is a perennial Top 25 power.

Meanwhile, the university's funding from the state Legislature has been cut in half in the past decade. The situation was so dire in 2015 that the university drafted plans to declare financial exigency due to a lack of academic funding from the state.

## The 2019 Trends Report



### The Trends Report, 2019

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Nowhere is this financial contrast more evident than in infrastructure. LSU has a \$700-million backlog in deferred maintenance, and on the campus's academic side, "threadbare buildings" aren't uncommon, infrastructure is "run-down," and funding for renovations has "sort of maxed out," said Robert Mann, a professor of media and public affairs.

"The library" — prone to flooding since the 1980s — "is decrepit, almost falling in on itself," he said. "While on the other side of the tracks, you've got these Taj Mahal-like facilities for football and basketball and baseball and every other sport.

"It's sort of the best of times and the worst of times," he continued.

Mann holds no animosity for LSU athletics or the administration. He lives near the campus and tailgates on football Saturdays. His two children attend the university and watch the team play in its 102,321-seat Tiger Stadium. But he believes the disparity between athletic and academic facilities points to a larger issue of misplaced university priorities — and the public importance assigned to football records over academic ones.

“The disparity is a mile wide,” Mann said of public support for academics versus athletics. “And I don’t know what it’s going to take to close it. I just don’t see that happening in this state anytime soon. I don’t resent football; I just wish people cared as much about what we were doing in the classroom.”

In a statement, an LSU spokesman wrote that “it’s important to understand that our different foundations have different roles on campus working toward the common mission of the university.” Donors give to the Tiger Athletic Foundation, knowing it will go toward athletes, infrastructure projects, and salaries, while other funds go toward academic projects, including Patrick F. Taylor Hall, a recently renovated engineering building.

### **3 Little Pigs**

Big money in college athletics is no new phenomenon. Academics have felt angst over the emphasis on football, especially, for more than a century. But in recent decades, salaries for coaches and money for facilities have skyrocketed.

“We’re running commercial operations — and I include my own university — that really are inconsistent with the state of academic gains,” said Charles T. Clotfelter, a professor of public policy at Duke University who wrote a book about big-time college sports. “We don’t even acknowledge the fact that we’re doing this thing because there’s virtually no mission statement of any major university that even mentions athletics, much less commercial athletics.”

Clotfelter likened the funding disparity between academics and athletics to three little pigs, two of which are struggling and one of which runs a hedge fund, works in a commercialized world, and “probably lives in a brick house.”

The finances, Clotfelter said, are “by and large separated.” LSU’s football renovations, according to a 2018 news release, were “100 percent funded by money raised by the Tiger Athletic Foundation.” The foundation did not make anyone available for comment on Monday.

And LSU is among the leaders in athletics spending: The university reported more than \$123 million in athletics-related expenses in 2016, the ninth-highest total in the country. For a 2018 legislative audit, it reported more than \$137 million in expenses. About \$8 million in athletics profit was transferred back to the university.

“In general, universities will raise all the money they can, and then the university will spend all the money it raises,” Clotfelter said. “In this case, you’ve got an operation that’s taking in all this money. And in fact, they can’t spend it fast enough.”

Clotfelter said the LSU situation was the most recent proof of a general rule: Athletics ventures share little with their university, “except the name and the tradition of operating. But in terms of the objectives, it’s not really part of the bigger enterprise.”

And that’s not even addressing the issue of more fairly compensating college athletes, especially football players who produce millions for their university and in return receive scholarships and personal sleeping pods designed to mimic first-class air travel. Such inequities, in the face of a \$28-million renovation of a facility built in 2005, has drawn the ire of former LSU stars and sports commentators alike.

“The locker room when I was at LSU seven years ago was better than the current one in Carolina,” tweeted Eric Reid, a former Louisiana State football player now on the NFL’s Carolina Panthers. “But there’s no money to compensate these young men for the revenue they bring to the school #JustSaying.”

Like Mann, Clotfelter expects little to change anytime soon. The baseball stadium in Baton Rouge was ranked the best college ballpark in the nation; the gymnastics program recently completed a training center that cost more than \$10 million. And the Tiger Athletic Foundation reported more than \$45 million in contributions and grants in 2017.

Less than a half mile from the gymnastics center, Middleton Library is still flood-prone. Two waterproofing projects cost the university about \$850,000 over the past eight years, but February brought a rising water table, north-side flooding, and a situation that Stanley Wilder, dean of Louisiana State libraries, described as “crisis mode.” The basement is still inaccessible to the public.

“So there are plans to erect a new library on this campus, and they talk about it a lot,” Mann said. “The one thing they can’t talk about is they have no way to pay for it.”

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