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\$6 million center tutors jocks only

U. of I., other colleges draw faculty, student criticism for spending so much on so few

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November 28, 2008

CHAMPAIGN — The Irwin Academic Services Center at the University of Illinois is outfitted with computer labs and classrooms; staffed with tutors, counselors and learning specialists; furnished with oversize leather chairs and Oriental rugs—and off-limits to 99 percent of the student body.

To get help with course work in this Tudor-style former fraternity house, which cost \$6 million to adapt as a tutoring facility, a student must run track, shoot basketballs, battle the Fighting Illini's gridiron opponents or participate in another sport.

Universities across the nation are offering even more spectacular tutoring centers for student-athletes, which have become a recruiting device for coaches. Louisiana State University's facility cost \$15 million; at Texas A&M University, \$27 million.

As the price tags rise, critics ask: Is spending this kind of money on a few athletically gifted students appropriate? At the University of Michigan, the student newspaper has pressed the administration to open its \$12 million athletic tutoring facility to students of all types—with no success thus far.

"These athletic tutoring palaces perpetuate resentment and stereotyping on campus," said Allen Sack, a University of New Haven professor who played football for the University of Notre Dame and has become a critic of what he sees as the corrosive effect of sports on university life.

"A student who is not an athlete will say: 'I'm working nights to get through school, why don't I get free tutoring?' " Sack said. "That the athletes do perpetuates the image of a dumb jock who couldn't get through school without special help."

The academic centers, usually funded and run by the athletic department, also have been tainted by scandal as one school and then another step over the line between helping athletes with their homework and doing it for them.

The University of Minnesota lost its basketball team and coach to that temptation in 2000 after an academic counselor revealed having written 400 papers for the players. Last year, Florida State University suspended a group of football players after it was revealed that a tutor gave athletes answers while they were taking tests.

Some critics also note that the facilities' directors often report not to an academic official but to the school's athletic director, creating the potential for a conflict of interest.

Life after sports

Defenders of the centers argue that they prepare student-athletes for life after the football field and basketball court, as only a fraction move on to pro sports. Debby Roberts, a learning specialist at the Irwin Center, said she counsels Illini athletes to use their college years to develop their non-athletic potential.

"It's a daily battle," Roberts said. "They all want to think they're going to turn pro."

Supporters also argue that the price tag is relatively small in comparison to the money reaped by successful sports programs. In its budget estimate for this year, Michigan anticipated that athletic events would produce \$87 million in revenue. Operating its athletic tutoring center costs \$1 million.

Universities used to usher athletes through school with the "rocks for jocks" approach—a quip derived from the not-too-rigorous geology courses that would keep quarterbacks and power forwards academically eligible.

The new approach includes services such as one-on-one tutoring from other undergraduates, career counseling, therapy for learning disabilities and monitors to see that athletes get to class.

On a recent afternoon at the Irwin Center, a freshman soccer player used a computer to scan course offerings for next semester. A hurdles runner, bent over a textbook, reported that a high school teammate was foundering at a university that lacks a tutoring option. A basketball player was sprawled over a library table, eyes half-closed.

Nationally, some faculty members ask if such tutoring facilities are a bricks-and-mortar way of hiding a perennial problem: that many high school all-stars, recruited for their athletic abilities, may not be intellectually equipped to do university-level work.

"So you have squads of tutors and counselors dragging an army of half-asleep athletes from one classroom to the next," Sack said.

Yet there are counterexamples. Sam Carson, a fifth-year senior and linebacker on the Illini football team, said the university's athletic mentoring program helped him make the transition to college. Incoming athletes are required to spend 10 hours a week at the Irwin Center.

"In high school, parents or teachers keep an eye on you," said Carson, who's majoring in actuarial science, a mathematically rigorous discipline. "Here, I might have been tempted to stay in my room and watch television if I didn't have to put in those study hours."

More attention

Both supporters and critics agree that the tutoring centers provide athletes an experience largely denied others at a mega-university.

"On campus, academic counselors might meet with a student once or twice a semester," said Tom Michael, director of the Irwin Center. "Here, student-athletes develop a relationship with one of our counselors."

Although he supervises 50 to 60 tutors and a professional counseling staff, Michael reports to the athletic director, not to a dean or provost.

Isn't that an invitation to put success on the playing field ahead of academic integrity? Michael replied that a faculty oversight committee monitors the center's work. Asked for the panel's annual report, he declined.

"It contains confidential material about our student-athletes," Michael said.

At some schools, faculty has pressed the issue of bringing athletic tutoring under academic control. Ohio State University made the shift in 2005 after a former football player alleged that he was given passing grades he didn't earn. Four other Big Ten schools now provide for dual reporting to an academic officer and the athletic director.

Yet some critics are skeptical of such structural repairs, saying problems are inevitable in a system that asks athletes to double as students—and ordinary students to tutor star athletes, the celebrities of campus life.

Michael is proud of his program, which he says could serve as a model for tutorial programs for the larger campus community. Yet he acknowledges that isn't likely to happen. The Irwin Center serves about 550 students and operates on an annual budget of a little less than \$1 million.

Divide \$1 million by 550 and multiply the result by 37,000, the number of students on campus. The result—the cost of providing equal tutorial opportunities to all students—is a very large number: \$67.3 million a year.

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