
Ducking education: The UO administration allows out-of-control spending in the athletic department while the downhill slide of academics hurts faculty and students alike

By Nathan Tublitz and James Earl

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What exactly are the priorities at the University of Oregon? Recent announcements of a \$2 million buyout of the contract of Bill Moos, the university's athletic director, and a \$4 million learning center solely for athletes are deeply troubling. They demonstrate yet again the university's preoccupation with athletics at the expense of academics.

As professors at the university, we find it increasingly hard to tell whether the UO is an academic research and teaching institution devoted to the education of our state's students, or a minor league training ground for elite athletes. Academic departments struggle to make ends meet because of repeated budget cuts, but the president allows lavish spending by the athletic department. These actions have consequences for our students and faculty, and the university's academic stature.

The primary losers are our students. The university provides scholarships to several hundred student-athletes, many of whom do not meet admission requirements - yet we cannot find sufficient financial aid to help Oregon's neediest high school students. The athletic department spent more than \$1 million from 2003 to 2005 on recruiting, including \$140,000 for a single weekend for 25 football recruits. The same \$1 million would pay for 62 talented biology, journalism or art students to attend the university for a year, or 15 students for four years.

Students are affected by poor resource allocation in other ways. Class sizes have grown since 2000 because of a 20 percent increase in undergraduate enrollment, without an equivalent increase in full-time faculty. Students are closed out of classes because there are not enough faculty to teach them. Graduate students, the lifeblood of a research university, have dropped by 10 percent since 1970. Instead of hiring new faculty and attracting new graduate students, the university has devoted scarce resources to boosting the number of athletic coaches and staff by 25 percent since 1994. What's more important at the university, better education or better games?

The academic environment has declined in other ways too, less obvious but no less significant.

The biology department today has 20 percent fewer office staff than in 1997, but 20 percent more students. Since 1994, its annual budget has increased by 47 percent, to \$3.96 million from \$2.7 million, while the athletic department's increased by 224 percent, to \$41.5 million from \$18.5 million.

The average cost to teach a student in the biology department this year is \$705; the cost per student-athlete in the athletic department is more than \$92,000. The head coaches of football and men's basketball together make more than all 30 full-time tenure-track biology professors.

Faculty salaries at the UO are the lowest in the American Association of Universities. Ancillary support services for teaching and research are fast disappearing. New and current faculty members are being lured away by other institutions. Many faculty now

pay for classroom photocopying, business phone calls, and even students' books. Meanwhile, the athletic department furnishes its offices with leather sofas, pays its coaches multimillion-dollar salaries, charters private jets, etc.

Our academic reputation is declining. The UO's 2004 four- and five-year graduation rates, at 36.4 percent and 56.7 percent respectively, are significantly below our academic peers and near the bottom of the Pac-10. Oregon is the only Pac-10 school to be recently downgraded by the Carnegie Trust from the top tier to the second tier of national research universities. The 2007 US News and World Report college ratings rank us 120th in the country, the best among Oregon public universities but still mediocre. Our overall graduate program ratings are lower than 20 years ago. It is worse than ironic that our academic rankings are dropping as our football rankings rise.

The overemphasis on athletics extends even to fund-raising. The university's \$600 million capital campaign is on target to raise \$200 million for athletics (not including possible donations for the planned basketball arena). The (Portland) Oregonian reports that this percentage for sports in a capital campaign is the highest in the nation - in fact, more than double the national norm. The university has a responsibility to ask donors to support academics first, before donating to athletics.

Intercollegiate athletics can enhance the educational experience. College sports develops the life skills of athletes, is a positive campus focus for other students, and generates shared bonds and experiences among alumni, students, faculty and the community.

These goals can only be achieved, however, if athletics remains secondary to and integrated within the university's mission to educate our students. It is no honor for a university to succeed on the playing field while it is losing in the classroom.

We cannot reverse this downward trend in education until we admit that it is happening. UO faculty leaders have recognized the problem, and have put together a detailed plan to improve academic quality.

The problem, of course, is that any plan requires money. Unfortunately, the state has been disinvesting in higher education for a long time. The state now provides only 13 percent of the university's operating budget, and this figure is likely to drop in future years. Alternative sources of funding will be required to improve our quality. One source might be athletics.

Many people think athletics makes money for the university, but that is not true. At Notre Dame and Ohio State, the athletic departments give back more than \$10 million every year to education - but at the UO, not a penny. A few years ago the faculty asked the athletic department to add a mere 25 cents to football and basketball tickets, to be earmarked for student scholarships. The request was refused. We asked that a small percentage of every donation to athletics be earmarked for education. The administration refused. All athletic revenues and gifts go entirely to the athletic budget, which has been growing four times faster than the university's. When education is in trouble, we think the Ducks should be able to contribute something more than fun.

We are by no means suggesting that the university get out of intercollegiate athletics. Athletics is and will remain an essential part of campus life at the UO. But the current emphasis on athletic success draws our attention away from the real problem, which is academic decline, while the administration pretends that everything is fine.

The University of Oregon, the state's flagship school, is struggling to maintain its academic quality and reputation. Nearly 20,000 non-athlete students are spending hard-earned money and enormous effort to achieve their college educations here. We owe it to them, and to the taxpayers and the state, to put our limited funds where they will do the most good. It's time to put academics first.

Nathan Tublitz is a professor of biology and former president of the UO Senate. James Earl is a professor of English and former UO Senate president. This statement was co-signed by 90 additional senior UO faculty members. See the link below for the full list.

See the list: **[92 UO faculty co-signers of Jan. 14, 2007, Register-Guard Guest Viewpoint](#)**

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