
Mr. Kilkenny, what is the real cost?

By Nathan Tublitz

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I

was gratified to learn from Athletic Director Pat Kilkenny's July 11 guest viewpoint of his strong support of academics and that he believes in the fiscal self-sufficiency of the University of Oregon athletic department. Like all good columns, Kilkenny's stimulated a few questions:

1. What are Kilkenny's plans to reverse the declining graduation rates of our athletes? The graduation rate of UO athletes has declined precipitously in five years, to 47.3 percent from 78 percent.

The current overall UO graduation rate is 63.3 percent. We are below the national Division IA average graduation rate in nine out of 13 NCAA sports, according to NCAA data.

2. How does Kilkenny reconcile the unusually high percentage of UO student-athletes admitted despite not meeting admission requirements ("special admits") with his expressed interest in increasing athlete graduation rates?

The latest data show that 18.7 percent of freshman athletes are special admits, compared to only 1.5 percent of the rest of the freshman class. Reducing the special-admit percentage might improve the graduation rate.

3. Is Kilkenny certain the UO athletic department is "self-sustaining"?

The NCAA states that only seven of its 1,200-plus member institutions are truly self-sustaining. Many hidden costs are not counted as athletic expenditures, such as athlete tuition remissions, facility planning and central administrators' time. When the real costs are added up, it may be that the UO athletic department is not fiscally independent of university funds.

4. Precisely how does building a palatial \$220 million arena contribute to the athletic department's self sufficiency? Current estimates suggest that 25 percent of the cost, or about \$55 million, will have to be borrowed. The loan will be guaranteed by the university, not the athletic department.

More worrisome is that in order to make the loan payments, the arena will have to be rented out about 40 days each year for circuses, pop concerts, motorcycle racing and other traveling shows. That's like buying too big a house and having to rent out rooms to pay the mortgage.

5. How will erecting an arena "continue to pump money back into the university's budget"? No funds currently flow on a regular or irregular basis from athletics to academics, and there are no plans for such flows to occur. Moreover, if the arena fails to generate sufficient income to make the loan payments, funds will be diverted from academics to athletics.

6. How does the notion of fiscal prudence fit into the athletic department's spending

spree in the past six months? The basketball coach received a hefty raise (well deserved, in my opinion); two new and expensive sports have been added (men's baseball and women's competitive cheerleading); a \$10 million-plus athlete-only academic learning center is planned; millions are being pumped into Hayward Field; and Kilkenny's predecessor was paid \$1.8 million to retire. Then there's the \$220 million or more to be spent on the arena.

7. How does massive spending on athletics fit into the UO mission? The UO mission statement starts by saying we are "a comprehensive research university that serves its students and the people of Oregon, the nation and the world through the creation and transfer of knowledge in the liberal arts, the natural and social sciences and the professions."

To attain that lofty goal, the UO initiated a \$600 million to \$700 million fundraising campaign. To date we have raised \$500 million, one third of which has gone to athletics. We are No. 1 in the country in the percentage of university fundraising campaign going to athletics. At most schools, that number is 15 percent or less. If the arena is built, the campaign percentage earmarked for athletics will rise to nearly 50 percent.

These skewed funding priorities have resulted in some embarrassing imbalances: Music students practice in bathroom stalls for lack of proper facilities; the number of UO graduate students has declined over the past 35 years; student-teacher ratios have risen by 20 percent; and many undergraduates are unable to enroll in the classes they need.

Yet we have the resources to fly in 17-year-old recruits on private jets, outfit the football team annually with garish new uniforms, replace the new, million dollar artificial turf at Autzen Stadium because it didn't feel quite right, and supply football players with individual video gaming stations in each of their lockers.

One final question:

8. Is the UO an institution devoted to education with a few sports teams, or are we an entertainment business that happens to give a few degrees on the side?

I and many others here at the UO and in the community look forward to Kilkenny's answers.

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