

# Universities' spending on student-athletes is up sharply, survey shows

BY CHRIS TALBOTT

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OXFORD, Miss. — From the moment he stepped on campus, 320-pound tackle Michael Oher seemed destined to be a star on Mississippi's football team and a failure in its classrooms.

Oher was the son of a crack-addicted single mom and as a teen could barely read. His educational record — 11 schools in nine years as he moved from home to home in Memphis — read like an indictment of a failed education system.

But four years later, at a school that graduates fewer than 60 percent of all students within six years, Oher has cleared every hurdle and nearly earned his degree — all that stands between him and graduation are a final semester and workouts for the NFL draft.

"I haven't struggled a bit in college," the All-American offensive lineman said. "It's been a breeze."

It's a tribute to Oher's determination and character.

His story also says something about the state of big-time college athletics.

Like a lot of other athletes at Ole Miss and elsewhere, Oher got not only tutoring help but a full range of academic support services throughout his career. At Ole Miss, 14 full-time staffers line up tutors for student-athletes, help them choose classes, monitor study halls and check attendance. More than 60 percent of the Rebels' 390 athletes receive at least some tutoring, and together they averaged about 1,000 sessions a week this fall.

Such services are not unusual.

The last five years have seen an astounding jump in the time, money and resources devoted to academic support for student-athletes even as some faculty complain that ordinary students are being left behind. To learn more about the trend, The Associated Press surveyed the 65 schools from the six major conferences involved in the Bowl Championship Series plus independent Notre Dame.

The AP started work before the first kickoff of the season and eventually obtained at least some financial information from 45 schools about the resources they devote to graduating athletes.

The picture formed by the data is one of schools frequently spending more than \$1 million annually on academic support, with some spending hundreds of thousands of dollars more in 2008 than they did in 2004, the AP found. Eight BCS schools reported spending increases of more than 70 percent in the last five years. Four — South Florida, Illinois, Georgia and Kansas — more than doubled spending.

Helping athletes graduate has become its own academic profession. A national group for people who work in the field has nearly doubled its membership to around 1,000 in just two years. Many work in new academic centers devoted to athletes.

Behind the spending binge, fueled by both public and private funds, are toughened NCAA regulations that now punish schools for poor academic performance.

Ole Miss opened a remodeled, 23,500-square-foot, \$5 million center a year ago.

Up the road in Starkville, Mississippi State recently cut the ribbon on a \$10 million building that features group and individual study areas, private cubicles for tutoring and the latest in computer and video conferencing, plus a cafeteria and weight room.

A few weeks after Mississippi State opened its center, South Carolina upped the ante with a groundbreaking ceremony for a \$13 million facility.

Plans call for a three-story center at Oregon.

Oklahoma, with a 30,000-square-foot facility that cost \$7 million to \$8 million, spent about \$2.45 million helping all its athletes last year.

Florida, the Sooners' opponent in next month's national championship game, spent \$1.67 million. Texas (\$1.90 million), Ohio State (\$1.89 million), Kentucky (\$1.86 million), Tennessee (\$1.83 million) and Georgia (\$1.77 million) are in the same league.

There's also a range of criticism. Faculty have raised concerns about oversight and the growing disparity between concierge-style academic support for athletes and what nonathletes receive.

"It grates," said Kenneth Holum, a longtime University of Maryland history professor and chairman of the faculty senate.

"Why are the athletes more deserving than the other students? We try hard to give all the students an equal chance to profit from the material we're providing them, and other students don't have this opportunity."

Teachers like Holum also believe that the growing academic support system hurts educational values. They worry that student-athletes get so much help that they never learn the lessons of personal responsibility.

And critics say athletes are increasingly isolated.

At Maryland, the basketball players practice, eat dinner and then report to study hall in the Comcast Center. That may save time for studying, but it's an example of how the centers can further isolate players from the rest of the student body.

(Editor's Note: This is the end of the article as it appeared in the newspaper.)