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## **The Games Students Play**

**As the college recruiting wars continue to heat up, institutions are looking to outdo the competition with bigger, badder facilities. The latest carrot on the recruiting stick is lavish, state-of-the-art recreation centers that look and function more like private health and wellness clubs than the smelly, dank PE complexes of yesteryear.**

By Dave Barista  
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Every now and then, Erik Kocher catches himself daydreaming about what his ultimate next-gen student recreation facility might look like.

While no universities have yet to take him up on his vision of a rooftop leisure pool with a glass bottom, or a walking/jogging track that changes elevation, or an "urban climbing wall" with faux brick, stone ledges, and windows, Kocher never stops dreaming of new ways to remake the student recreation experience.

"Fifteen years ago, the challenge was getting university recreation centers built," says Kocher, design principal with St. Louis-based Hastings & Chivetta Architects. "Today, it's all about making these facilities really special because schools want to distinguish their campus from the competition."

Indeed, universities large and small are replacing their smelly, old physical education buildings with posh, high-end facilities packed with amenities and activities that rival private health and wellness clubs. Spas, personal trainers, leisure pools with wait service, tanning salons, private locker rooms, food vendors, saunas, WiFi—these are just some of the amenities that are becoming commonplace in college recreation centers.

To some, this level of pampering might seem quite unnecessary and even downright inappropriate for college life. But in the business of higher education, where schools are competing for the best and brightest, institutions are looking for any edge they can get on the recruitment front. And improving the quality of life on campus is a sure-fire way to stay competitive.

The National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association estimates that more than one-third (34%) of the nation's colleges and universities are currently building or planning a new, renovated, or expanded recreation facility. This is based on a fall 2006 study by NIRSA where

221 of its 650 institution members said they were in the midst of building or planning projects, representing well more than \$3 billion in construction spending. On average, universities are investing nearly \$22 million on new construction projects, \$13 million on expansions, and \$6 million on renovations.<sup>1</sup>

This is money well spent, says Curtis J. Moody, FAIA, NCARB, president and CEO of Columbus, Ohio-based Moody•Nolan, which has designed dozens of recreation facilities throughout the U.S., most notably Ohio State University's 600,000-sf, \$135 million Recreation and Physical Activity Center, the largest such complex in the nation.

"The recreation component is truly a difference maker in recruitment, especially if everything else is comparable," he says. As proof, Moody points to several clients, including West Virginia University and Miami (Ohio) University, that have made their new recreation facilities the first stop on campus tours. "We've had multiple clients change their entire recruitment tour once their recreation center opened," he says.

Showing off new facilities is one thing, but where do college students rank the importance of rec centers versus other campus buildings in college selection process?

About middle of the road, according to a May 2006 study of 16,153 college students by the APPA: The Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers (chart, p.46). Thirty-two percent of respondents said that student recreation facilities are either "extremely" or "very important" in the selection process, well behind "facilities for major" (74%), library (54%), and classrooms (49%). Rec centers did, however, outrank several other non-academic facilities, including dining halls (29%), performing arts centers (22%), and student unions (21%).<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, of the respondents that ranked recreation facilities as crucial to the selection process, nearly 40% said they were dissatisfied with the facilities at their school.

Moody says the challenge for universities today is meeting a much higher level of expectation among students, many of whom come from communities that have upscale health and fitness clubs and community recreation centers that are loaded with amenities. "They've grown up with that as a standard, and they expect that level of quality and amenities when they go to college," says Moody.

On warm, sunny days in Columbia, Mo., Mizzou students routinely flock to the newly renovated Student Recreation Complex hoping to break a sweat. But they won't touch a piece of equipment, or even slip on their gym shoes. Rather, they'll spend the afternoon soaking in the rays and chatting it up with friends while lounging around the facility's outdoor leisure pool. Complete with a bubble pool, drinks catered by wait staff, a flat-screen TV, a waterfall, and a raised hearth fireplace, the Mizzou Beach Club is like something right out of a private Caribbean resort, and that's just the atmosphere that university officials were hoping to create when they renovated and expanded the facility.

"It's a place to see and be seen in," says Kocher, whose firm designed the \$50 million, 293,000-sf facility.

The interior of the Mizzou SRC is no less lavish. Students can get a manicure or facial at the spa, work on their tan in the tanning salon, or get a bite to eat at the Red Hall Beverage Co. cafe. If worse comes to worse, they can also work out. The building has a fitness/weight room with more than 100 pieces of equipment, a power lifting room, a 42-foot climbing tower/boulder wall, racquetball/squash courts, and a 50-meter competitive pool. A Disney-style theme ties all the disparate components together.

"We're starting to see theming and branding as a trend among our clients," says Kocher. "I think the Mizzou project has gone the furthest in terms of branding."

Moody says institutions are going to great lengths to create a "special experience" for the students. "These facilities are one of the primary social spaces on campuses, where you're going to meet your friends, hang out, and even study," he says. This means creating plenty of warm, inviting spaces for students to congregate and socialize, including leisure pools, lounges, meeting rooms, food courts, and saunas.

Even fitness areas are being designed to encourage more social interaction. Take the walking/jogging track, for example. Gone are the days of the traditional oval track suspended over the gymnasium. Today's tracks come in wild, racetrack-like configurations that wind throughout the facility, offering numerous views of the spaces and outdoors.

A case in point is the track at Midwestern State University's planned \$12 million, 56,000-sf Student Recreation and Health Center in Wichita Falls, Texas. The three-lane, S-shaped track will wind through a two-court multipurpose gymnasium, fitness and strength training areas, and over the main lobby, and will offer unobstructed views of the facility's outdoor leisure pool.

On the Huntington, W. Va., campus of Marshall University, the new track will also take students through multiple spaces and will even intrude into the facility's indoor aquatic area—via an enclosed glass tube.

"It's not a boring experience running around the gym anymore," says Mark J. Bodien, AIA, principal and Director of Student Focused Facilities with Moody•Nolan, architect of the Midwestern State facility. "It's a social thing. People walk and talk together, and can see and be seen."

Climbing walls have also gotten more hip and social. Teams are designing boulder-like structures that reach 50-60 feet in height and offer many levels of difficulty. Most unusual is the rock climbing wall at Southeast Missouri State University's newly expanded rec center, which sits right in the middle of the indoor leisure pool on the Cape Girardeau campus.

"The idea is you climb out of the water and up this boulder wall, and if you fall off, you fall back into the water," says Kocher, who's firm designed the addition. "It's just that much more challenging and exciting."

Of course, there is a price to having all these state-of-the-art amenities and services, and it's the students themselves that usually end up footing the bill. Because student recreation centers don't qualify for public funding, cash-strapped universities and colleges often struggle with securing sufficient funds to build, expand, renovate, and operate these facilities.

"The vast majority of these projects are funded by the students, through increased student activity fees," says Kimberly A. Martin, associate with the planning firm Brailsford & Dunlavey, Washington, D.C., which has worked on more than 300 university projects across the nation.

In some cases, student activity fees are imposed through administrative directive. In other cases, they must be approved in a student referendum. Either way, students (and their parents) can end up paying \$50, \$100, even \$150 more each semester to finance the construction and operation of a recreation facility.

To help ease the fee burden on students, some schools are getting creative on the financing front, especially if they're looking to build a facility that is larger and more lavish than the students and their parents are willing to support.

One approach that is becoming more popular is to incorporate academic classrooms and related functions into the facility to qualify for state capital funds. Ohio State's facility, for instance, incorporates classrooms, specialized research labs, a computer lab, faculty and departmental offices, a dedicated fitness research room, and various meeting and student spaces for the school's health education department. The move netted the project \$36 million in state funding.

Marshall University is dabbling with the public/private partnership model to fund its new facility, a first for student rec centers, says Martin, whose firm is working on the project. As part of a contract to build and operate two new "living-learning" residence halls on campus, a private developer partner, Capstone Development Corp., Birmingham, Ala., is also funding the construction of the 120,000-sf rec facility. Under the deal, Capstone will own and operate the three facilities for 30 years, at which time ownership will transfer to the university. "I think we'll see more partnerships like this down the road," says Martin.

To help generate operating income, universities are increasingly relying on revenue from amenities like private locker room memberships, food sales, personal trainers, and spas. For example, the University of Missouri charges students for use of the spa and suntanning salon, as well as for exercise classes.

Many schools are also opening up their facilities to staff, alumni, and the community, charging market-rate membership fees for use of the fitness areas, aquatic center, locker room, and other amenities.

If all of this is just a sign of things to come in student recreation, then it's only a matter of time before one of Kocher's daring concepts comes to fruition. Take, for example, the "fitness center within a fitness center," which turns the testosterone-filled art of power lifting into a spectator sport for the other patrons.

"There's a little bit of performance art in power lifting, with loud music and mirrors all around," says Kocher. "I want to put the heavyweight lifting equipment in an enclosed box with one-way mirrors in the middle of the fitness center, so the people on bikes and treadmills can watch the power lifters in action."

Kocher says he hasn't had a taker for that idea either. But that's not going to stop this inspired architect from dreaming big.

1. *"Collegiate Recreational Sports Facilities Construction Report 2006 - 2011," Fall 2006, National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association, [www.nirsa.org](http://www.nirsa.org)*
2. *"Final Report on the Impact of Facilities on the Recruitment and Retention of Students," May 2006, APPA, [www.appa.org](http://www.appa.org)*

Extremely or very important facilities in the university selection process	73.6%
Facilities for major	
Library	53.6%
Sophisticated technology	50.9%
Classrooms	49.8%

Extremely or very important facilities in the university selection process	73.6%
Facilities for major	
Residence halls	42.2%
Exercise facilities	35.6%
Bookstore	34.6%
Open space	34.4%
Student recreation facilities	32.3%
Science or engineering facilities	29.6%
Dining halls	28.6%
Performing arts center	21.8%
Student union/center	21.3%
Visual arts center	16.3%
Intramural sports facilities	14.8%
Varsity athletic facilities	14.2%

Chart denotes the percentage of students surveyed that rank various campus facilities as either "very important" or "extremely important" in the school selection process. Source: "Final Report on the Impact of Facilities on the Recruitment and Retention of Students," May 2006, APPA

What's in, what's out in university recreation facility design	In	Out
<b>Branding</b>	Use unifying theme or vocabulary (e.g., "Disneyesque") throughout	"Physical Ed Facility" look and feel
<b>Fitness/weight area</b>	Multiple weight rooms, for serious and novice users; open plan with views to other spaces and outdoors; abundant daylight	Single, expansive space
<b>Track</b>	Walking/jogging tracks that wind throughout the facility offering different views of the spaces and outdoors	Oval tracks with limited views
<b>Aquatic</b>	Multiple bodies of water for both exercise/competition and leisure; whirlpools; saunas; zip lines; bubble pools/wet decks; waterfalls; lazy rivers	One-size-fits-all pools for both exercise/competition and leisure
<b>Locker room</b>	Private facilities with towel service,	Large, sterile locker rooms

What's in, what's out in university recreation facility design	In	Out
	toiletries, flat-screen TVs, upgraded materials/finishes	with countless lockers and group showers
<b>Exercise rooms</b>	Group exercise rooms with ample storage for equipment (stationary bikes, exercise balls, mats, etc.); temperature control	Multipurpose rooms with little or no storage
<b>Amenities</b>	Wait service, tanning salons, spas, food service, Wi-Fi, private locker rooms, flat-screen TVs, bookstore	Amenity-free facilities
<b>Lobby/entrance</b>	Expansive, dramatic spaces with lounges, study areas, food court/juice bar, activities sign-up, views to the fitness areas	Small vestibules leading to a check-in desk
<b>Circulation</b>	Open, transparent spaces with attractive graphics and signage	Long, windowless corridors

### Space planning standards for university recreation facilities

#### Overall facility = 10-13 gsf per student

- Add for employees if available to employees
- Add for alumni/community if available to alumni/community
- Add for non-redundant academic/athletic spaces
- Subtract usable existing spaces, but consider intramural sports, sport clubs, and efficiency of existing spaces
- Add for projected enrollment growth
- Add or subtract based on residential/commuter and full-time/part-time student ratios
- Add for multiple campuses

#### Weight and fitness area = 1 nsf per student

- Add/subtract based on gender mix
- Add/subtract based on commuter mix

#### Multipurpose rooms = 0.5 nsf per student

- Add for sport clubs and other specialized programs
- Add/subtract based on gender mix

#### Wellness and social spaces = Case by case basis

Source: Brailsford & Dunlavey, Washington, D.C. [www.facilityplanners.com](http://www.facilityplanners.com)

Note: These are general estimates. Space planning should be based on detailed needs assessment and market research specific to the campus and region.