



Photos courtesy of Hastings &amp; Chrette Architects, Inc.

# Shaping Up Community Fitness Centers

There's a lot of value in opening campus fitness centers to a wider audience, but the move requires some changes in everything from design to policy.

**T**here's no question that opening membership to the general public at recreation and fitness centers offers campuses a tempting revenue stream. But directors who've done just that can't gloss over the changes they've needed to adopt for this audience, either.

For Mary Ellen Milam, the senior associate director of campus recreation at Texas Christian University (TCU), it began with finding herself on the wrong side of the IRS rules. The bond structure they used to build the facility means only a certain percentage of its use could be what is known as "unrelated business income" or, in plain English, non-TCU students or faculty. As a result, the University is allowing current membership holders to renew, but

cannot accept new ones until the attrition rate brings the percentage back to less than nine percent of all users.

It's a common slip-up, according to Jeff Sessine, vice president of Centers, LLC, a Washington, DC-based recreation management firm that focuses exclusively on colleges and universities. That's why his company advises colleges to start with a full-blown business plan to make sure they have done the right capacity analysis, market surveys, and established membership policies that meet those goals.

Milam discovered just how these elements play out with the indoor/outdoor pool at TCU's recreation center. Although the campus is located in an affluent

section of Ft. Worth, it was one of the few places with this feature, so it suddenly became a country club setting. “We had so many small children and families, the students couldn’t have access to the area to lay out,” she said. “In terms of having to limit community memberships, that was the first area where we really cut back because it almost became overrun with babies and toddlers, which is not a problem except when the college students don’t feel welcome any more.”

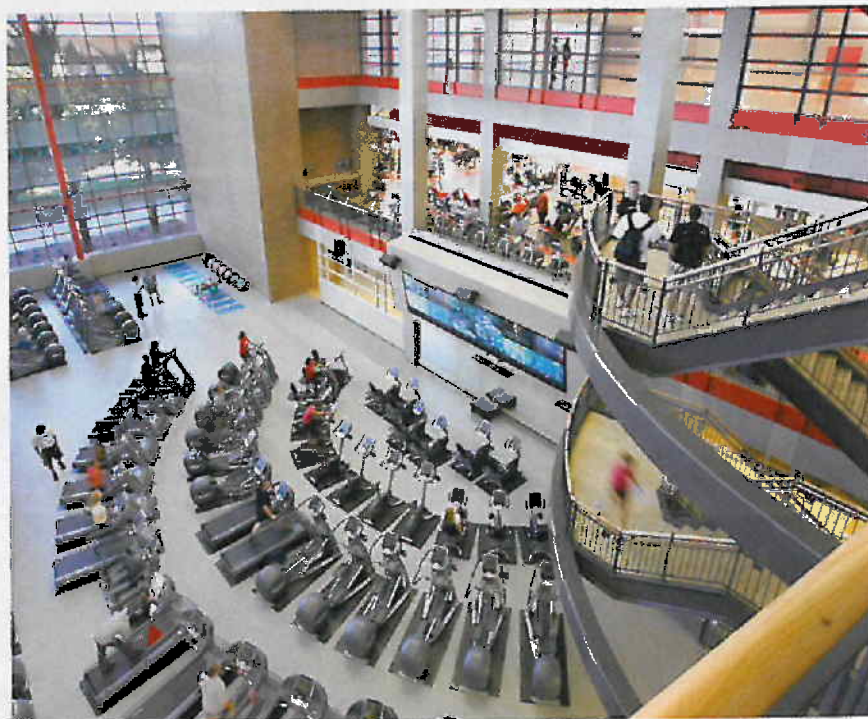
When Brookdale Community College in Lincroft, NJ, decided to build a new fitness center as part of the athletic facilities expansion, administrators agreed it would be appropriate to invite a magnet high school on its campus to use it, as well as allowing departments to offer non-credit continuing education courses there. Hospitals are also expected to refer the general public here for cardiac rehab patients when it opens in June 2010. Add this to the 800 community college enrollees, and the mix is undoubtedly varied.

But one aspect stays the same. “With all these competing interests, it does create some stress in terms of everybody wanting to use it at the same time,” said Frank Lawrence, director of athletics, recreation, and fitness at Brookdale. “If we could just get some people to come in at 2 A.M. and work out...”

### Design

Because Brookdale is starting from scratch, administrators had a lot of discussions on layout details, such as whether to have separate entrances for different audiences. Eventually, the decision was no, Lawrence reported. They wanted to take advantage of diversity in the ranks (see *Generational Benefits*, page 77) and look at the layout in terms of activities instead. “In the end, I would say our expanded audience didn’t have a major impact on the design,” he noted.

If Milam had it to do over, she’d factor



Campus fitness centers can be marketed to the surrounding community as a valuable revenue stream. However, college and university administrators should do their homework on the ramifications of doing so — including legal, liability, and scheduling concerns — before throwing open the doors.

in children on the blueprints. Currently, TCU’s fitness center doesn’t offer special restroom adaptations for children, a family changing room on the pool deck, or a child-care area. “We designed the building to be adult-driven,” she said.

### Security

TCU takes a hard line with its ID policy, as students know. But when it comes to the fitness center, even children accompanying their parents need a card to get past the counter. The extra layer is smart, said Sessine, as an expanded audience brings up all kinds of new security situations. “For instance, if two students get into a fight, the University has rules on how to handle that. But a student and a community member is different — the staff has to know the proper authorities to call because it might be the city police jurisdiction now,” he pointed out.

Likewise, the staff needs to know what

to do in the case of a kidnapping — Amber Alerts and Code Adam aren’t likely occurrences on other areas of a campus. Again, it’s not difficult to train employees in these procedures, Sessine said — the challenge is in recognizing these situations and drawing up procedures ahead of time.

On the bright side, maintenance is not an issue. The facility will need to adhere to the same standards no matter who uses it.

### Equipment

TCU’s campus supports 8,000 students, yet the fitness center offers as much cardio and weight equipment as a neighboring university with a population of 25,000, thanks to the need to accommodate these expanded audiences. “I won’t say we overbought,” Milam said, “but we do try to maintain a wide variety of equipment.”

She feels that pressure because of the clientele, which does not fall into the struggling middle-class category. Even the fact

that TCU is a private college environment builds an expectation that students shouldn't need to wait long periods for a treadmill. And everyone is quick to point out when a piece of equipment isn't working properly or needs repair.

"There's a little sense of entitlement that comes with membership to this facility," she admitted. "We try to maintain an atmosphere that accommodates that as much as possible. But there have been rare instances where I've sat down and told one of our community members, 'I don't think this is the place for you.'" Especially the gentleman who expected shampoo in the showers and a valet parking service, just as he would get at the country club.

That gap may be narrowing on other campuses, however. Sessine said spa massage centers are a growing trend at university recreation centers, along with specialized programs, like Pilates.

### Personnel

According to Sessine's research, a fitness center is the second largest employer on a campus. That means a greatly reduced staff over Christmas break and spring break for TCU, when the campus is open at all. "I get complaints sometimes: 'What am I supposed to do for 10 days while the University is shut down?'" Milam shared. "We really try to educate members on the front end who aren't as aware of what an academic semester involves that there will be break periods."

### Beyond the Dollar


## Generational Benefits

Opening the campus fitness center to the community dangles some tempting benefits beyond the hard, cold cash:

- **Faculty:** Opening the program to faculty members' families has helped build a better sense of community for Texas Christian University, where the average student is the traditional 18–22 age group. Allowing spouses and children access has become a perk that builds morale and a sense of belonging to the campus, said Senior Associate Director of campus recreation, Mary Ellen Milam.
- **Alumni:** A fitness center gives alumni a chance to work out in familiar surroundings and feel like they're still part of the inner circle. Most alumni say they love the chance to mingle with a college crowd and stay in touch with campus issues. Fundraising departments couldn't ask for a better attitude.
- **Community members:** Campus fitness centers offer community members a safe harbor where they can work on health issues without the meat market social scene often prevalent at other centers. Many of the trainers and supervisors are highly certified students working toward a master's in exercise physiology or other medical angles, so it's a great place to get advice and one-on-one oversight.

### Atmosphere

Finally, despite the benefits of an expanded user base, these groups don't always rub along together smoothly. Milam started out her day in early December with an e-mail asking, "Why does TCU hate kids?" "OK, we don't hate kids. But we have to be conscious of the fact that having young children in a facility that constantly interacts with mostly adults isn't physically safe," she pointed out. As a result, she limits the hours when children under 12 and children under 18 can use the center; the idea is to avoid a middle-schooler playing hoops with grown men on the court. Parents, of course, don't always see it that way. "They just see it as you aren't allowing my child to do what they want to do," she added.

Dress codes and language can also be an issue. Although TCU forbids students from running in just a sports bra or wearing t-shirts with vulgar sayings, it's still their facility first. Families run the risk of exposing their younger kids to sexier attire and off-color conversations they wouldn't be exposed to at other public venues. "As much as you try to maintain a non-offensive environment, we are on a college campus and users need to understand that," she said. 

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