

Alfred University agrees to build new softball field

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Alfred University will undertake construction of a softball field on campus this summer under the terms of a voluntary resolution agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Construction of the softball field and other renovations to women's locker room facilities that are already under way at the University's McLane Physical Education Center are part of an agreement that concludes an investigation into a Title IX complaint filed in June 2008 by a group that identified itself as "parents of Alfred University female student-athletes." "We agreed late Friday to sign a voluntary resolution agreement, which spells out certain actions the University must take in order to maintain our compliance with Title IX," said Kathy Woughter, vice president for Student Affairs since 2005. "Fortunately, most of the actions outlined are things we either took care of years ago, or are in process." The resolution agreement specifically states the "Agreement has been entered into voluntarily and does not constitute an admission that the University is or was not in compliance with Title IX and/or its implementing regulation." The University began its \$14 million "Score One for Alfred" Campaign about two years ago to upgrade and/or construct improved athletic facilities for all student-athletes. Construction of a softball stadium and a related addition of a new practice field for all sports are among the centerpieces of the campaign. "We will go ahead with the construction of the softball field this summer, even though we have not yet reached our fund-raising goal," said Woughter. The agreement says that AU will have the softball field ready for the start of the next season. Rather than building the top-tier stadium included in its plans for the "Score One for Alfred" campaign, in order to meet the agreed-upon timeline, the University will be constructing a regulation field that will be very nice, but without some of the facilities that would have been included in the proposed stadium. Woughter noted that doing so would not prevent the University from making additional improvements to the softball facility if funds are raised for that purpose. Alfred University has been playing its home softball games on the Hornell High School field. There are other stipulations in the Resolution Agreement but in many instances, the University has already taken the actions requested. One of the items pertained to adding more women's locker room space, for example. "We have made progress in the last several years on this item," said Woughter, "and we are steadily working through additional locker room renovations." She noted that McLane Center "was planned and built long before we had a full complement of women's sports. As we have added women's sports in response to interest from student-athletes, we have tried to retrofit McLane to provide comparable facilities for men and women." The University will break ground next month on McLane Center Annex, which will add more locker rooms, as well as expand court space and provide an indoor track. Title IX refers to the Equal Opportunity for Education Act, federal legislation adopted in 1972. While the act covers all aspects of an educational program, and seeks to assure that men and women are treated equally, it is frequently associated on university campuses with athletic programs. Woughter pointed out that Alfred University, from its founding in 1836 as the first co-educational institution in New York State, has been a leader in educating women on an equal basis with men, and that includes providing opportunities for personal growth through academic, extracurricular and athletic programs. Six years ago, the University established an innovative Women's Leadership Center, which is proving to be a "tremendous asset to women students at Alfred University," Woughter said. She also stressed that the University "both supports and celebrates Title IX's impact on women in sports. The law was created with excellent intent and the outcome for women students - including myself as a former student-athlete - has been tremendous," Woughter said. However, Woughter said it is disheartening that the Office of Civil Rights discounted the University's substantial investment in the equestrian program, which has both athletic and academic components, when considering the facilities available for men and women athletes. "Our investment in the equestrian program added more than 60 participation slots, almost all of which are filled by women. In the investigation process, OCR indicated that they would not count our investment in the equestrian program because it is a co-education sport, as is mandated by our competitive organization, the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association. Equestrian student-athletes are as much a part of our community as our other Saxon women athletes. I am disappointed that OCR dismissed the program enhancements because one or two men each year join equestrian teams."