

Good Opening Can Be a Scholarship



Bruci Raul Lopez, 22, a senior, has a chess scholarship at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

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In the competition for the best students, colleges and universities are always looking for an edge. This year, [Texas Tech University](#), in Lubbock, is trying a novel approach: offering scholarships to prospective students who are also elite chess players.

With the scholarships, officials hope to attract students who might not otherwise apply to the university, which is part of the state system.



Katerina Rohonyan, 22, from Ukraine, is a computer science major at Maryland-Baltimore.

“To be quite frank, Tech is not [Harvard](#) and we have to compete really hard for the best students,” said Dr. Haraldur Karlsson, an associate professor of geosciences at the university who is also the chess club’s adviser. “And there tends to be a link between good chess skills and good academic skills.”

This year, Dr. Karlsson said, the university selected seven recipients for the scholarships. One is enrolled at Texas Tech, but six are prospective applicants, three from overseas. “We are accessing a different pool,” Dr. Karlsson said. “We are getting them to look at us.”

Texas Tech joins a small group of institutions that have decided that good chess players are likely to succeed academically, and that offering chess scholarships can elevate a college’s reputation. The [University of Connecticut](#)’s engineering school, hoping to lure applicants away from the country’s top engineering programs, also began offering chess scholarships this year.

Other institutions with such programs include the [University of Maryland](#), Baltimore County, and the University of Texas at Dallas, each part of its state’s public university system. According to Jim Stallings, director of the [Texas](#) program and also chairman of the college committee of the United States Chess Federation, the governing body for chess in this country, there are “10 or so” such programs nationwide.

Founded in 1985, Maryland’s program is one of the oldest in the nation. Dr. Alan Sherman, the program’s director since 1991, said university officials supported the scholarships not only to attract good students but also to raise the profile of the institution. Dr. Sherman estimated that the program cost about \$250,000 a year. For that investment, the university has one of the most successful chess teams in the country. It has won the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championships, the elite event in college chess, many times, including in 2005. The other big winner nationwide is the University of Texas at Dallas.

Dr. Sherman said having a successful chess team benefited the university. “I see the competitive team as a means towards a more important end, which is bringing smart people to campus who will do things in math and science and other fields,” he said. Usually, Dr. Sherman said, there are eight students on chess scholarships. The best scholarships cover tuition, room and board, and are worth \$69,400 over four years. For that package, Dr. Sherman said, a student must meet several requirements, including maintaining a grade point average of at least 3.0 and achieving nearly a grandmaster rank in chess.

Katerina Rohonyan and Bruci Raul Lopez have such scholarships this year. Ms. Rohonyan, 22, a junior originally from Ukraine, is a computer science major. After she graduates, she said, “I think I will probably work, but I will try to play chess more often.” Mr. Lopez, 22, a senior born in Cuba who is an information systems major, said he wanted to get a job in his field of study. “I can always play chess,” he said. Mr. Stallings, the director of the University of Texas at Dallas program, founded in 1996, said it was intended to attract better students, and “was publicity because we don’t have a large football team.”

The university now awards about 25 chess scholarships, Mr. Stallings said, but he added that not every member of the chess team had one.

Nelson M. Lopez II, a freshman from North Carolina who won the 2006 national high school championship, said he applied to the university because of the strong team. "It was a real big deal," said Mr. Lopez, who does not have a chess scholarship but instead has a full academic scholarship.

The financial value of a chess scholarship is often substantial. At Texas Tech, for example, for out-of-state or foreign residents, the scholarship covers about 75 percent of tuition; for in-state students, it covers 25 percent.

Scholarship winners generally come to the notice of universities by playing in chess tournaments nationwide or even worldwide. The University of Connecticut's engineering school in Storrs, for example, awarded its scholarships, which are for four years, to the top three finishers in a tournament on campus in September. The institution plans to hold another tournament in October to offer three more scholarships.

But chess scholarships have not met with success at every institution. Morehead State University in Kentucky offered such scholarships for two or three years but discontinued them this year, said Carol Becker, director of financial aid. She said officials decided that having a separate scholarship for chess players made no sense.

"We don't have a chess team or a chess club, and we concluded that someone who played chess would probably have the analytical skills to qualify for our institutional scholarships," Ms. Becker said.

In the end, she said, "We weren't really getting a lot of bang for the buck."