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LEVERAGING ATHLETICS TO BUILD CAMPUS CULTURE AND ENROLLMENT

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“Competition for students has never been so intense.” The words of a 15-year veteran college president, currently serving a residential liberal arts college in the Northeast, speak to the need for innovative marketing of campus programs to meet that challenge: “Every day I hear something new that I’ve never heard before in the continuing battle among institutions to meet the enrollment bottom line,” he points out.

Robust intercollegiate athletic programs and state-of-the-art fitness facilities are one essential strategy for recruiting and retaining student-athletes. In fact, the number of colleges where at least 33 percent of the students played a sport increased from 96 to 124 between 2006 and 2011, according to an Associated Press report. Students often report that along with cost, location and academic programs, the opportunity to play is paramount in their college choice.

In researching this column, we studied progress at five institutions categorized as residential liberal arts colleges that utilized new athletic facilities as a way to build enrollment and increase operating revenues; while fostering a greater sense of community and energy on campus. One institution is in the South, two are in the East, and two are located in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Each has a visionary president who strategically set goals designed to lead to a specific outcome. Most utilized the services of outside enrollment counsel (two utilized The Dysart Group) to develop an enrollment matrix that would control the discount rate and produce a significant return on investment. In addition, each institution re-evaluated the effectiveness of its chief enrollment officer and utilized the services of experienced search counsel to find the perfect fit to lead the institution’s admissions renaissance.

All five colleges we studied had completed makeovers to

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their athletic facilities. Common features included artificial turf, lights, all-weather tracks and enhanced or expanded locker and weight facilities and training rooms. Two of the colleges utilized private bond offerings, financing the improvements over 20 years with payments drawn from growth revenues. Two utilized private donor and corporate sponsor support and the final institution drew upon institutional reserves.

The revitalized facilities also enabled each college to attract a new brand of coach. “These coaches are essentially an extension of the enrollment office. Coaches are given a number of scholar-athletes for whom they are accountable. Most coaches approach their new challenge with a fire of success,” stated one of the presidents.

Injecting new excitement in its athletic program, a college in the South initiated a football program. The 80 players on the roster and the Saturday afternoon atmosphere arriving with the new sport created a healthy buzz on campus. The biggest boost to the marketing of campus life at this institution, academically and financially, was the addition of a marching band. College officials report that the band grew from 30 to 100 students in a five-year span; the Music Department had to increase faculty to meet the need for musicians.

Two Mid-Atlantic colleges which we studied wanted to utilize new recruiting territories to change their institutional culture and grow. Completion of facility upgrades enabled them to expand athletic program offerings to include larger varsity football squads, a junior-varsity team, lacrosse and field hockey. One added water polo. All resulted in new market territory and enrollment reach.

Such enhancements have positively impacted recruitment and retention of student-athletes at the recreational and club lev-

els as well. All of the surveyed institutions state that the artificial turf and lights permit night-time intramural contests of all varieties that draw crowds comparable to some intercollegiate events.

“Back when we were in college, ‘jock schools’ were typically stereotyped as weak academically,” one veteran administrator said. “Now some of the best students are outstanding leaders, and thus, the ability to package small-college sports and academics is extremely attractive.” The end result has been startling. Each institution saw a six-year increase of at least 26 percent, with one institution doubling its enrollment during that period.

These results can be a big win for presidents, chief enrollment officers and their institutions’ marketing programs: expanded athletic offerings, enhanced facilities and amenities, and even marching bands can create momentum and energy while boosting enrollment. Over time, they will pay for themselves with increased tuition revenue.

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They have collaborated on nine books, including “President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education (2008)” and “Presidential Perspectives: Strategies to Address the Rising Cost of Higher Education” (2012). They are regular columnists for “College Planning and Management” and “Enrollment Manager.” Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.