

Admissions, Athletics, and Financial Aid

How to build a strong partnership among each of these areas.

By Kathy Kurz, Jim Scannell, and Samantha Veeder

AT DIVISION I SPORTS schools, the athletics programs can bring publicity to an institution. But they have a limited direct impact on enrollments. At small NCAA Division III (nonscholarship) and NAIA (scholarship) schools, however, athletics can play a significant role in meeting new student enrollment targets. At such institutions, it is not unusual for as many as 25 to 35 percent of new freshmen and transfers to be participating in athletics and, to varying extents, be coach recruited. Often these institutions will add new sports as a key element in achieving enrollment growth goals. Clearly, the partnership among Admissions, Financial Aid, and Athletics needs to be strong at these institutions.

But that partnership can take a variety of different forms, depending on where recruitment resources are housed, whether athletic scholarships are offered, the rules of the division and the conference, institutional traditions, and other factors.

COMMUNICATION

Regardless of the form of the partnership, communication among the three departments is critical. Commonly, issues arise due to a lack of understanding regarding each other's needs and goals as well as limitations and constraints.

For example, the coaching staff may see an SAT score that is within range of the institution's average and become frustrated upon finding out that the Admissions office has rejected the student. Speaking with Admissions, the coach may learn that, in fact, the student was failing



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a course or had other academic “red flags” on the high school transcript that led to the decision. Conversely, it’s important for Admissions staff to understand the needs and priorities of the coach. And, typically, neither Admissions nor Athletics pay attention to financial aid strategies until one of their top prospects either doesn’t receive a financial aid offer, or receives an offer that is viewed as noncompetitive.

Maintaining those lines of communication can often be as difficult as establishing them. However, as changes occur—such as annual adjustments to both costs and financial aid policies, changes in front-line personnel (i.e., assistant coaches and admissions recruiters), and changes to the profile of the applicant pool—all parties must remain

in the loop. For example, if the quality of the applicant pool has improved to the point that students who were once admissible are no longer automatically accepted, coaches need to know before they go on the road recruiting.

SHARED STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

Best practice partnerships go well beyond strong communications, and involve mutually supportive recruitment efforts. Barbara Fritze, vice president for Enrollment and Educational Services at Gettysburg College (Pa.), describes their partnership this way:

“Gettysburg College has a strong tradition of academic and athletic excellence. This foundation has enabled the college to build a strong partnership between Athletics and Enrollment. It starts by having the Athletic department report through the same vice president (a unique reporting structure, indeed), but this is only the beginning. Just like admissions marketing, athletic recruitment has become more sophisticated in the past few years. Coaches and admissions counselors now receive training on key marketing messages.

“Most important, all staff members have a good understanding of the scholar athlete profile desired by Gettysburg. ►

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We host athletic open houses and this endeavor is a 'true partnership' where admission personnel work hand in hand with athletic staff. Finally, Gettysburg has implemented an 'Athletics Operations Center' similar to what most Admissions offices have in place. All recruitment correspondence is handled by the AOC. It is personalized and customized by sport and is a separate track in the entire communication sequence a prospective student receives from the college. This allows the coaches to focus on what they do best: coach and build relationships one on one with prospective students and families."

THE ROLE OF FINANCIAL AID

Although Division III institutions like Gettysburg do not offer athletic scholarships, it is still important for coaches to understand the institution's financial aid policies so that they can talk convincingly with their recruits about affordability. Where strong partnerships exist, Financial Aid staff will frequently provide early aid estimates to help coaches with affordability messages. In addition, when the Enrollment management team is contemplating a change to awarding strategies, it is critical that they consider how subpopulations—like recruited athletes—will be affected.

For example, if the criteria for merit eligibility are being raised, it will be important to understand if recruited athletes—or athletes in particular sports—will be negatively impacted. This requires that the institution be diligent about collecting data on which admits are recruited athletes and which enrollees are participating athletes—a practice that is not common at many nonscholarship institutions.

The relationship between Athletics and Financial Aid is even more important at NAIA institutions where partial athletic scholarships are involved. At many such institutions, a natural tension can develop between Athletics and Financial Aid as coaches try to take as much advantage as possible of other institutional aid resources to leverage athletic dollars, and financial aid counselors try to include athletic aid before considering a student for

need-based grants. Setting clear institutional policies about such issues is critical to a strong and successful partnership.

Goshen College (Ind.) has taken an unusual and very effective approach to its investment in athletics. William Born, vice president for Student Life, explains, "As an NAIA institution, Goshen College has the opportunity to award athletic scholarships

At King College, coaches have individual recruitment goals, as admission representatives do.

as a part of its overall scholarship program. Within that context, we have developed a Financial Aid Index, allowing coaches to increase athletic aid based on the academic success of the student athletes being recruited. This partnership encourages coaches to recruit strong student athletes who excel both academically and athletically. In turn, the students are a strong fit for Goshen College, adding to overall campus life in meaningful ways. As a result, over the course of the past several years, the retention and graduation rates of our student athletes have been stronger than the general student population as well."

To further strengthen the partnership, Goshen is now planning to implement an approach that will award additional program funds to coaches that exceed target roster sizes.

CLEAR GOALS

Setting clear expectations for coaches regarding enrollment targets can help an institution ensure a return on its investment in athletics. The program at **King College** (Tenn.) is a good example. As Melinda Clark, vice president for Enrollment Management, explains, "At King College, each athletic team was evaluated and an appropriate roster size was determined and in some cases a junior varsity team was added. New sports were started after careful market research to determine demand and cost to operate. The athletic director's job expectations changed to in-

clude meeting the overall athletic recruitment goal. Each coach also had individual recruitment goals in much the same way as the admission representatives. The coaching staff worked closely with Admissions on recruitment training, communication flow, and processing. This close partnership has proven very successful at King. After four short years, new traditional student enrollment had grown by 76 percent and student athletic enrollment had grown by 117 percent. While some other initiatives contributed to the overall growth, athletic recruitment was and continues to be a very strong component."

AVOIDING PITFALLS

It is important to note that there are some pitfalls to avoid when implementing policies that link investments to enrollments. At one Scannell & Kurz client school, rather than setting specific enrollment goals and athletic scholarship budgets, coaches were simply expected to expend scholarship dollars to arrive at a target average award. The thought was that this would ensure a link between expenditures and enrollments. The problem: Coaches were offering very small awards to many students they had not recruited (and who had already committed to enroll) in order to balance out large awards offered to a handful of top recruits.

Another institution added a new merit award, targeted to "B-level" students in an effort to enhance enrollments and net tuition revenue (NTR). They hadn't considered that many athletes were going to be eligible for these awards, and consequently did not lower the athletic budget to reflect the availability of this additional, nonathletic resource. Of course the coaches were very happy during that recruitment cycle, but NTR goals were not achieved.

Clearly, the key to a strong partnership is the recognition that Admissions, Financial Aid, and Athletics staffs are co-dependent and really are on the same team! Their successes (and failures) are inexorably linked. Once this is understood, other important elements in the partnership, such as those discussed here, will follow. **U**

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