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THE CHASE

Athletics Raises a College From the Ground Up

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Adrian, Mich.

The Chase is an occasional series on athletics recruiting.

For decades, the 40-acre meadow separating Adrian College from a state highway was an afterthought on the modest campus of low-slung limestone buildings.

But in less than three years, the grassy expanse, like the college itself, has undergone a transformation. The newly developed acreage — boasting an ice arena, football and baseball stadiums, a track, and a dozen tennis courts — is the cornerstone of a plan to raise enrollment through intense athletics recruiting.

And to the relief of college leaders concerned about the future of the small, private liberal-arts college, the plan appears to be succeeding more quickly than they had anticipated.

Since 2005, enrollment has surged 57 percent, to 1,470 students, the highest number in at least two decades. More than half of those students play varsity sports. The college has also become more selective: Three years ago, Adrian accepted 93 percent of the 1,200 students who applied. This year it accepted 72 percent of its 4,200 applicants. Faculty members, pleased with the trend, say the caliber of students in their classrooms has improved.

Administrators are optimistic that athletics recruiting will be a lasting antidote to the sinking enrollment and moribund student life that had plagued the institution. Coaches have quotas they must hit or lose their jobs. And the tuition dollars that athletes bring have already enabled the college to make much-needed improvements in academic buildings and to hire more faculty members.

"I have all the sports I need every time I turn on the television," says Jeffrey R. Docking, Adrian's president and a chief architect of the plan. "I would not have started one of these sports if I didn't think it was good for enrollment and the future of the college."

The use of athletics to drive enrollment, he says, could well be "the fountain of youth for small liberal-arts colleges."

Ready for Change

Adrian did have a head start. For years the college had owned but never developed the 40-acre meadow adjacent to the main campus. And when Mr. Docking arrived in 2005, the institution was in good fiscal health, with little debt, enabling it to more easily borrow large sums.

But problems abounded, and the Board of Trustees was ready to try something drastic. Enrollment had sunk to 935, well below the capacity of 1,400 students, and showed no signs of rising. Three residence halls were shuttered, the ones that remained open were falling apart, and retention rates were suffering.

In Michigan, a state with the highest unemployment rate in the nation, the college's total price tag of \$24,800 — which has since increased to \$31,000 — was hardly a recruiting advantage. Among Adrian's competitors are the

state's many large, public institutions. Many of its students also apply to Michigan State, Central Michigan, Western Michigan, and Wayne State Universities, says Carolyn Quinlan, director of admissions at the college for the past 24 years.

Persuading cash-strapped students to consider Adrian depended on offering something they couldn't get elsewhere, Mr. Docking says. That "something" turned out to be extracurricular activities — in particular, sports.

At the time, though, the college's athletics department was a modest operation, with only five full-time coaches. Recruiting had little oversight. Several of the teams, including the football team, competed on local high-school fields because the college lacked adequate competition space.

So, shortly after Mr. Docking took office, he and Richard A. Creehan, executive vice president, came up with a plan to present to the governing board. They called for an outlay of \$30-million — roughly half of it borrowed and half of it raised from donors — to expand the athletics program and build sports facilities on the undeveloped land.

The idea, Mr. Creehan recalls, was: "Spend money to make money."

Rapid Expansion

In three years, in addition to building the new facilities, Adrian has added five varsity teams and six club teams. It has hired 11 new full-time head coaches. The plan requires the 16 head coaches of varsity sports to bring in a total of nearly 200 athletes each year. (Please see chart on Page A19.)

"We say to these coaches, 'You have one job: Recruit,'" Mr. Docking says. "We've had to let go of coaches who haven't made their numbers." (The staff members who supervise the student newspaper, student government, cheerleading and dance teams, and marching band are also required to collectively recruit an additional 40 or so students annually.)

Several coaches, many of whom are in their 20s and have joined the college in the past two or three years, say meeting the numbers is well within their reach.

"It's a plan that works for people who love their job and want to be successful," says Chris Delfausse, head coach of the men's lacrosse team, which won eight of 14 games in its inaugural season last spring. The administration, he says, hires only coaches "who are attuned to what their message is and what their goals are, so it works out."

Money helps, too. The athletics department's operating budget has more than doubled since 2005, from \$300,000 to \$800,000. And recruiting expenses have grown even more significantly. In the 2006-7 academic year, Adrian spent \$31,000 on recruiting, compared with \$2,800 in 2001-2, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

The decision to include ice hockey and lacrosse among the new programs was strategic, as both sports tend to be popular in affluent areas. Also, in the Great Lakes states and Canada, hockey is among the most popular of sports, but in Michigan, only one other institution in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division III fields a hockey team.

And lacrosse is rooted in the mid-Atlantic states and New England, regions from which Adrian hopes to pull more students in coming years. It is also fast becoming one of the most popular sports at the high-school level in many suburban areas, including those near Detroit and Ann Arbor. But before the creation of men's and women's lacrosse teams at Adrian, Michigan had no Division III lacrosse programs. "Because we're the only program in the state, we're getting all the kids," says Mr. Creehan.

Athletes are now one of the largest groups on the campus. Last month the 300 or so athletes who returned for preseason workouts far outnumbered the entire freshman class from just three years ago. And nearly half of this year's incoming class of 581 — the largest in Adrian's 149-year history — is composed of varsity athletes.

"They love the game, they love the sport, and they want to continue to play," says Mr. Creehan. "What we're saying is, 'You can continue to do that here.'"

'All I Could See Was Dirt'

For a college where only 22 percent of students hail from out of state, the task of spreading Adrian's name

throughout the Midwest, let alone farther afield, is slow going.

"It's a step-by-step process," says Mr. Delfausse, the men's lacrosse coach. As he prepares to start recruiting his third class of players this year, he says he finally feels as though Adrian has enough name recognition to give him traction hundreds of miles away.

"In the first year, I don't think I called a kid in Maryland or New York or Massachusetts," he says. "Now we're actively going after more of the Maryland kids. It's still a long shot, but more kids are listening."

Ron Fogarty, coach of the men's hockey team, was given free rein to travel wherever he felt necessary. He recruited all but three of his 25 players last year from the junior hockey leagues that are popular in the upper Midwest, New England, and Canada. Half of the squad is Canadian; outside the ice rink, the Canadian flag flies next to those of the United States and Michigan.

One of the players Mr. Fogarty recruited was Adam Krug, of Livonia, Mich., a senior who is captain of the team and last year led Division III colleges in scoring. After competing in various junior hockey leagues after high school, Mr. Krug played two seasons for Wayne State, a Division I team.

When Mr. Fogarty suggested that Mr. Krug transfer to Adrian to play hockey, it was hardly ideal timing for a recruiting pitch.

"When I came on my visit, all I could see was dirt," says Mr. Krug, who at 25 has earned the nickname "Dad" from his teammates. "So you have to use your imagination."

Coaches and administrators at other institutions were skeptical of the philosophy of using athletics to increase enrollment, says Mr. Fogarty, whose team won 26 of 29 games in its inaugural season last year. "But now that they see it, they believe it," he says.

The additional revenue from higher enrollment has enabled Adrian to make significant improvements in academic buildings and in faculty hiring. As its operating budget has grown to \$43-million from \$23-million since 2005, the college has modernized two academic buildings, expanded the campus dining hall, and hired 16 tenure-track faculty members.

"It's exciting, and we're getting good stuff and better digs," says Beth M. Myers, a professor of English who serves as the college's faculty-athletics representative in NCAA matters. An alumna who has taught at Adrian for 28 years, Ms. Myers says she has seen various efforts to boost enrollment come and go. But the plan offered by Mr. Docking and Mr. Creehan "is the only one that's worked that's brought us a good group of students."

Few faculty members express reservations about the student population having so many athletes, Ms. Myers says. "We think athletes are a pretty good cross section of humanity. They have all the various backgrounds and issues and strengths that any group of students would have."

A New Look

A philosophy is useful in galvanizing coaches to recruit aggressively. But having brand-new facilities certainly helps to close the deal.

Visitors to the athletics complex at Adrian College walk on concrete sidewalks that are free of stains. Trees barely stretch above six or seven feet, and a drive on the unpaved access road to the most distant fields kicks up clouds of dust. A statue of a bulldog, the college's mascot, even sports a jersey with a large '06' on the back.

As the facilities rose from the meadow, they built momentum in the recruiting effort.

Natalie Niblock, 20, a junior from White Pigeon, Mich., transferred to Adrian last year from nearby Madonna University. Her older brother Troy, a senior at Adrian, is the starting quarterback and co-captain of the football team.

"I used to actually make fun of Adrian when he first came here his freshman year, because it looked way different," says Ms. Niblock. "I was like, 'Ew, yuck, it's so little.'"

Today she is happy with her decision to transfer. The opportunity to play volleyball was a crucial factor, she says, just as it was for many of her teammates. "We're all like, 'It's so expensive,'" she says. "If we didn't play volleyball, we wouldn't come here."

Still, Mr. Delfausse, the men's lacrosse coach, says he and other coaches would like to see the athlete population decrease slightly. "The majority of us would like to ... have more of the student base be music or theater or the academic side of things," he says. "I think the school wants it that way as well in the long run.

"If you go too far to one side," he says, "you lose the balance."

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