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Gender Gap? Try Football

To boost male enrollment on campus, more small colleges are starting new teams

Homecoming football game at College of Idaho, one of 86 colleges and universities to start new football teams in the past decade. *PHOTO: TODD MEIER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **DOUGLAS BELKIN**

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CALDWELL, Idaho—Five years ago, the College of Idaho had a problem: enrollment was down and the gender balance of the 1,000-member student body was out of whack. Nearly two thirds of the students on this manicured residential campus 30 miles outside of Boise were women.

"There were like 40 guys," said Kylie Reagan, who was a sophomore in 2011. "You ended up dating your best friend's ex-boyfriend—or you went to Boise."

The school's unlikely solution? It started a football team.

"It was kind of a relief," said Reagan. "One day you look up, and there were just all these guys everywhere."

After years of dominance on college campuses by men, women earned parity in numbers during the 1980s. Today, women outnumber men 57%-43%—and enjoy higher

graduation rates. When the ratio of women to men tilts past 60-40 at a particular school, applications drop, enrollment officers say.

That makes the competition for the shrinking pool of college-bound boys a high-stakes chase, especially for smaller private schools already favored by girls and facing enrollment headwinds. For a growing number of those schools, the answer is football.

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Between 2005 and 2015, at least 86 colleges and universities fielded new football teams. Of that pool, 67 saw an uptick in male enrollment on the day of their first game, compared with three years earlier. The average shift in the gender balance was nearly nine percentage points per school, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of data from the NCAA and the federal government.

"When we did a market analysis, we realized this was a gold mine," said Marvin Henberg, the former College of Idaho president, who pushed to bring football back to the school. Three years after announcing their team, total enrollment was up more than 10% and the gender disparity was gone.

The turn to football as a savior comes as the sport faces a huge challenge over head injuries, which are cutting the number of youth players in the game and casting a shadow over the NFL. Still, schools that need a quick boost of testosterone for their struggling admissions picture can't resist the allure of the sport. The number of NCAA football teams and players is at an all-time high.

Berry College in Rome, Ga., started a team in 2013 to address a gender imbalance that was approaching 70-30.

"The students started to say to me, 'Dean Heida, if I'm going to be around guys this weekend, I'm not staying at Berry,'" said Dean of Students Debbie Heida.

The team's first game drew 6,700 fans and sold out the stadium. The student body grew to 2,141 from 1,928 three years earlier. Of the 213 additional students, 179 were men.

Alderson Broaddus University in West Virginia fielded a team in 2013. It now carries 130 players and "definitely surpassed expectations," said Eric Shor, vice president for enrollment management. "If there was any way to do it, we could easily carry 180 players."

The football team helped the school's enrollment grow to 1,052 in 2013 when the team started, from 566 when it was announced in 2010. Male enrollment more than doubled to 543 from 202 over that time.

Men's lacrosse and soccer are both growing at significant clips, but so are the women's teams in those sports so the effect on the gender imbalance isn't as strong.

And while football programs can lead to losses of tens of millions of dollars for some major programs, only 12 of the 86 schools to start teams in the last decade are at Division I universities. The rest are at smaller schools where athletic scholarships are generally small or prohibited and training facilities and stadiums are less than palatial.

At College of Idaho, the push to create a football team got off to a bumpy start. It was twice raised—and twice shot down before Henberg started a campaign to persuade faculty it was the answer to the school's anemic enrollment.

Many on campus worried that the caricature of a football team populated by meatheads would hurt the schools' self-image as a progressive, intellectual enclave.

"There was a fear that you'd have 100 physically imposing guys off to themselves and they'd get rough," said Lynda Danielson, a math professor who also attended College of Idaho as a student. "We were afraid they would upset the balance here."

Henberg encouraged the faculty to call their counterparts at schools which had already started programs. They signed on. The school sunk $6 million into the program, including a new weight room, and signed an agreement with the city of Campbell to rebuild a municipal stadium.

Mike Moroski, a former pro quarterback hired to coach, had no trouble recruiting players—even though his scholarship budget was about $3,500 a player. "I told them they had a chance to build the program from the ground up," he said

High-school players like Hayden Paul, who were looking at other small schools out of state, opted to stay close to home to play for the only small college team in Idaho.

"I would not be here if they did not have a football team," said Paul, a senior who plays center on the team and will graduate this year. "There isn't a player on the team who would say otherwise."

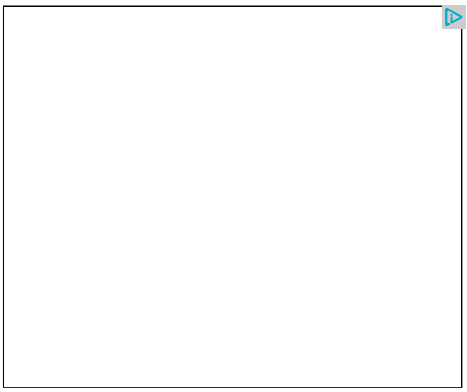
The first year, the team drew 65 players and only practiced. The second year, the squad grew to 100 players and by the third they had 115, with many paying nearly the full $34,000 cost to attend.

"The reality is that football is very lucrative," said former athletic director Marty Holly.

Part of the reason it pays to bring in football is because retention is high. Freshmen and sophomores who don't get much playing time work toward starting their junior or

senior year, Henberg said.

Paul said he cried this year when he learned a freshman had beat him out for a starting spot. Still, he never seriously considered quitting because he thought it would not be fair to the rest of the team if the first string player was injured and he was not there to back him up.



"I owed it to them," he said.

The Coyotes went 4 and 7 in 2014, their first season, and sold out the stadium for most of the home games. Moroski said he now receives unsolicited between 2,000 and 3,000 highlight tapes from high-school football players hoping to catch his attention.

Meanwhile the bookstore, which has traditionally operated at a loss, earns an additional $200,000 a year, mostly because of game day sales of school T-shirts, sweatshirts and hats. The school created a marching band and a cheerleading squad.

"I grew up in the '60s and '70s. If you had told me that one day I would started a cheerleading team, I would have looked at you funny," said Charlotte Borst, the school's current president, who researched the history of gender in science.

Professors say the team has done fine academically and the campus culture has not been negatively impacted.

"Our fears were really biased," Danielson said.

On a recent game day, Moroski gathered his players before they headed out on the field. They were coming off a loss the week before.

"It doesn't matter what we did last week, it matters what we do the next play," he said. "Passion and grit. Passion and grit. Everything we do, every play. They're not going to give us anything. We don't want them to give us anything. Let's go after them!"

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