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## Looking to Sports to Bolster Enrollments

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. — In today’s tough economy, some smaller tuition-driven institutions are living paycheck to paycheck. As managing undergraduate admissions becomes a matter of institutional life and death, some of these colleges and universities are increasingly looking to their athletics departments to bring in more students, and dollars. Division III institutions of the National Collegiate Athletic Association are at the front line of this push for athletes, and recruiting at the non-scholarship level is now more expansive than ever.



At last week’s NCAA convention — while the [recruiting tactics of some Division I institutions](#) were under fire — academic and athletics leaders from a handful of Division III colleges sang the praises of recruiting to the well-being of their institutions.

Kim Fierke, director of athletics at Salem College, said that most of the athletes recruited to Division III institutions would never have considered them if it were not for the influence of their coaches. Fierke, who conducted a study of Division III basketball recruits in the Southeast, also discovered that most of their institutional knowledge came from athletics officials rather than from those in admissions. Though some of the recruits in Fierke’s study applied to Division I institutions who offered them full scholarships, most were pleased to find that the Division III colleges for which they were considered wanted them for more than their athletic ability. Ultimately, she said these close relationships with athletics officials did more to attract these students to smaller colleges than did traditional admissions tactics.

Although athletics recruiting alone certainly helps attract students to institutions like Salem — a women’s liberal arts college in Winston-Salem, N.C. — other institutions need to take more aggressive moves.

Stuart Gulley, president of LaGrange College, in rural western Georgia, always used to say that he would never sponsor a football team on his campus, adding that he “wasn’t going to allow for something like that to rapidly change the culture” of his institution. When the college received an unrestricted \$3.5 million donation from an alumnus, he rescinded his word.

“We were thinking how would could maximize the return on our investment,” Gulley said of the unrestricted gift, an unusual blessing for a college president. “Well, nothing would have the return 100 male students would have in tuition.”

The college juggled ideas of adding more faculty members and updating its facilities before finally deciding that adding a football program might generate greater returns than all of the other spending ideas combined. Still, even though Gulley had changed his mind, it wasn’t an easy sell among the

faculty — who conducted a vote with a third in favor of football, a third opposed and third who abstained. Gulley said they were worried that adding the team would take a great deal of energy away from the academic-centric nature of the institution. He noted that even other athletics officials worried it would drain interest and funding away from their teams, who would probably pale in the shadow of a football program.

The college had conservatively estimated that 80 male students would enroll for a chance to play on the football team, but in the fall of 2006 — the team’s first season — 109 enrolled. Such large numbers can stay on the roster for a Division III team because, as there are no athletics scholarships, there are no limits to the number of players on a team. For an institution that was female-only until 1953 and in 2006 was 63 percent female, Gulley argued, the new influx of males was worth its weight in tuition and diversity for the institution.

The influx of male athletes could create another kind of headache for the college, though. Its [latest data](#) under the federal Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act shows that 70 percent of its athletes are male, potentially making LaGrange vulnerable under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which requires equitable provision of athletics opportunities. Institutions must meet one of three provisions to satisfy Title IX — have female athletes in proportion to their representation in the student body, show a history of adding women’s sports, or assess athletics’ interest among both sexes to ensure that their interests are being met.

“Title IX considerations were very much in the forefront as we contemplated the addition of football,” Gulley wrote in an e-mail. “We do not meet the proportionality test, and would not even without football. However, prior to the addition of football and since, we have shown our commitment to adding women’s sports through the addition of women’s basketball and women’s cross country — both prior to the addition of football — and women’s lacrosse, to be added in spring 2010.”

Gulley also noted the college regularly surveys its female students to ensure that their interest are being met, adding that the institution believes it is “meeting the spirit and the letter of the requirements” of the latter two provisions of Title IX.

Although the football team lost every game in its first two seasons — this fall it managed a winning record — Gulley said the new program has paid dividends for the institution. In addition to the tuition paid by these athletes, the college now generates more than \$40,000 annually in football ticket sales, a figure that most Division III institutions would love to generate in a year. Also, the student body is now 55 percent female and 45 percent male.

Still, Gulley admits the retention rate among these football players is lower than he would like. The first class of football players had a 59 percent retention rate into its second year — not hurting overall figures, but not helping much, either. Currently, the institution’s overall retention rate stands at 53.5 percent, but Gulley said the college is aiming for a 70 percent rate by 2020.

## **Trouble Without Sports**

Some institutions that still have an aversion to football, however, are nonetheless reaping the rewards of their athletics department’s recruiting. Mike Geller, director of admissions at Wheaton College, in Massachusetts, said very frankly that if it were not for his athletics department, his institution would not be able to meet its annual enrollment numbers. Twenty-three percent of Wheaton’s more than 1,500 students are varsity athletes.

Also, for a campus that has only about 16 percent minority students, Geller said athletics recruiting has attracted a more diverse population of applicants. He attributed most of this success to Paul Souza, the college's track and field coach, who works with many urban programs like [Philadelphia Futures](#) to attract minority athletes to the program. This echoes [recent trends](#) that suggest many first-generation students are being attracted to and enrolled in greater numbers at small, liberal arts institutions instead of state public institutions.

Athletics recruiting can change the makeup of a college, but it can also fundamentally change the way in which its admissions operate. Cheryl Ish, director of athletics at King's College, in Pennsylvania, said her tuition-driven institution used to have recruiting quotas for full-time coaches to bring in a certain number of players on their teams. As varsity athletes make up 35 to 40 percent of the institution's freshman classes, it became important for coaches to meet such benchmarks to maintain enrollment figures.

This policy, however, "set back relationships between athletics and admissions about three to four years," said Ish, who added that many coaches felt like they worked for admissions when out recruiting. There were often turf wars over recruits to meet athletics department quotas, in which it would have to be determined whether a student picked King's because of a coach or another college official.

Though quotas have been replaced in favor of what Ish called "healthy roster ranges," the importance of recruiting has not faded. Since the landscape has become more competitive among Division III institutions and those in other divisions, she said coaches now must over-recruit for certain roster positions. In the balance of quality versus quantity, she said it is sometimes necessary to realize that too much effort cannot be wasted on the best recruit in deference to the many who may be overlooked or snatched up by other institutions.

Many Division III delegates at the convention expressed concern about what they called the recruiting "arms race" at the non-scholarship level. Unlike Divisions I and II, Division III does not have a highly regulated recruiting calendar and lengthy dead periods during which such activity is against NCAA bylaws. There were some who said they would advocate the introduction of such a recruiting calendar. NCAA officials, however, noted such a change is only being informally discussed; the battle for recruits at many tuition-driven institutions continues.

— [David Moltz](#)

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