

Adding Athletics to Boost Enrollment

The advantages of leveraging athletics, fitness and wellness in a hot market.

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AFFORDABILITY? Check. Location? Check. Intended major? Check. Intercollegiate athletics?

In an increasingly competitive enrollment market, the answer to the fourth question can strongly influence college choice. These days, students come to college not just to study, but also to compete on the fields and courts. The range of available sports often dictates the enrollment choice, differentiating peer institutions and driving an increased investment in athletic and fitness programs and services.



One of the hottest issues in student services is the challenge accompanying the far-reaching impact of Title IX. 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.

Where It's Working

Last year, 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 building a greater sense of community and energy on campus. One institution was in the South, two in the East, and two were located in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Each had a visionary president who strategically set goals that would lead to a specific outcome. Moreover, all five colleges had completed makeovers to their athletic facilities. Common threads included artificial turf, lights, all-weather tracks and upgraded, modern locker rooms, 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 of the schools invited 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 — entrepreneurial, accountable for student success and ultimately functioning as an extension of the institutional enrollment strategy.

Although the kind of program enhancements varied, all played a critical role in revitalizing the entire campus. A college in the South initiated a football program. The 80 players on the roster and the Saturday afternoon excitement created by the new sport


created a healthy buzz on campus. The biggest boost, however, both academically and financially, was the addition of a marching band. Officials at the college reported that their band grew from 30 to 100 students in a five-year span; the Music Department had to increase faculty to meet the need.

Facilities Matter

Two Mid-Atlantic colleges that we studied wanted to utilize new recruiting territories to change the institutional culture and grow enrollments. Completion of the 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 territory and recruitment reach.

Such enhancements have positively impacted recruitment and retention of student-athletes at the recreational and club levels as well. The colleges state that artificial turf and lights enable nighttime intramural contests of all varieties that draw crowds comparable to some intercollegiate events. A related and significant recruitment advantage, especially at smaller institutions, is simply the opportunity to enjoy participating as a student-athlete — without the pressure that can accompany high-intensity, big-money programs.

“Back when we were in college, ‘jock schools’ were typically stereotyped as weak academically,” one veteran mentor 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 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. An accompanying focus on student opportunity, fitness and fun is a more qualitative, but equally compelling, outcome. 

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