



2020 PIVOT DRILL:

ADDING OR CUTTING SPORTS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

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If you've played basketball on any level, you know how to pivot. This basic move is fundamental to the game. To pivot effectively:

1. You must have possession of the ball.
2. One foot maintains solid contact with the ground.
3. The other foot is mobile and allows the body to rotate and improve position while maintaining possession.

Admittedly, "pivot" has become an overused buzzword in 2020. However, breaking the pivot down in this way, and applying these basics to your athletics department and sports programs, can reap rewards – with COVID and without.

1

POSSESSION

As athletics directors and coaches, you already have possession. On your campus, you are the authority when it comes to athletics, intramurals and recreation. You also possess an understanding of recruiting challenges and how your domain can positively affect your institution's enrollment. You know the facilities you utilize are often used by the institution's recreational users and the community at large. All of these are factors that weigh on what sports you support and what other activities are part of your plans.

3

THE PIVOT

Which brings us to the actual pivot. Steve Sproles, Principal with Derck & Edson, LLC reveals: "For schools who are looking to grow enrollment or enhance the campus through athletics, there has been no let down in planning and this type of pivoting within the realm of athletics."

2

SOLID CONTACT

You know what your franchise programs are and these core offerings are established and thriving. For these teams, recruiting is going well, rosters are full and deep, and there are more wins than losses when you compete. You may even have a tradition of success with these programs, alumni support, and facilities that shine.

But then there are situations where you are lacking. This may include programs that struggle – either in all the categories that are mentioned above, or maybe in only a few, yet important, ways. There may be conference rivals who are bringing new sports programs to their line-up – sports that you currently don't offer. Maybe there is tension between varsity athletics and academics, intramurals, recreation, and even community uses. There may be concerns related to diversity, gender equity, facilities, and finances.

PENNSYLVANIA PIVOTS

Eastern University (St. David's, Pa.) is one such school with a clearly defined Academic Growth Initiative. They have possession of a plan to grow university enrollment through enhancing sports programming on various levels and in a variety of ways. Before March 2020, they:

- Secured Board commitment to investing significantly into athletics and recreational facilities.
- Renovated their softball fields as well as their secondary practice gym into a new Fitness Center. These moves gave coaches the backing and commitment to confidently maximize rosters, an important first step and a key to gaining buy-in.
- Established recruitment commitments for their coaching staff to maximize rosters.
- Increased total number of student-athletes from 327 (unduplicated) FY20 to 398 FY21 (incoming recruiting class grew by 68 percent - including COVID timeframe).

Eric McNelley, athletics director, states that taking a deep dive into the numbers was required to weigh the options and justify the Board's confidence in spending, in advance of realizing 100 percent of the projected returns. In addition, "cosmetic improvements have been huge," truly transforming existing spaces that were eyesores on campus and are now polished and branded venues that support recruiting efforts.

Today, Eastern is moving forward with JV programs, adding new sports, and building legacy projects. Per McNelley: "We are increasing our athletics bandwidth by introducing JV programs for a variety of sports. Our thought is we want to allow every opportunity for our students to participate in athletics, if they choose."

Planning is underway for improved outdoor facilities and a significant addition to current indoor athletics facilities to not only enhance what Eastern has but to also accommodate growth. McNelley goes further regarding the impact of this Legacy Project: "This will allow the future addition of a football program, men's and women's wrestling, and a competitive cheerleading squad, increasing our student-athlete enrollment to 568 unduplicated - a gigantic jump yet easily attainable if the plan is put into place appropriately."

PIVOTING IN VIRGINIA

Averett University (Danville, Va.) is also focusing on enrollment growth and visibility. Their approach flows through two pipelines - growth through academic program offerings and growth through non-academic channels. And with University President Dr. Tiffany McKillip Franks at every game, athletics play a key role in the non-academic channel.

Athletics Director Meg Stevens explains: "As a small, private university, we are always asking questions about how we can make sure we are on the front line, how we can enhance the student experience and create more opportunities for students to pursue their passion."



Often, the answer is through athletics. But not just any program will do. At Averett, they have thoughtfully and systematically considered programs and created a proforma to test whether programs are viable to introduce to campus and, over the years, whether they remain viable. This has dove-tailed into overall university planning, especially as the looming undergraduate enrollment cliff nears.

And it has not been set aside during 2020 and the pandemic. Says Stevens, "COVID is an athletics director's third full-time job. But we are not letting it slow us down. We're not going to get stuck in COVID. Instead we are using this time and the lessons we are learning to help us in the future."

This future may include programs such as women's wrestling, beach volleyball and distance track. "Adding men's wrestling brought us 45 young men. We have the equipment. Why not consider a women's team? We have a successful legacy in competitive volleyball. Does it make sense to consider competitive beach volleyball? We offer cross country. Could distance track make sense?" Consistent questioning is part of the visionary leadership and growth model.

Jennifer Lee, project manager with Derck & Edson, is currently working on campus planning at Averett. Regarding athletics, Lee explains, "We know what NCAA facilities need to look like, the dimensions and required space. Applying designs to available land, among existing buildings and fields, is the easy part. Working with campus leadership and the community, facilitating the discussion of the options, is where the interesting work starts."

Stevens acknowledges that Averett doesn't always lead with facilities. But they are certainly willing to take some risks in order to grow. The impacts of these programs are vetted using the proforma that all new programs go through that is based on a four-year ROI timeline and considers all the numbers, large and small. Over and above all that, Stevens emphasizes, "It's all about the people." Coaches are charged with building their programs but there are no quotas to meet. The focus is on optimum team sizes and student-athletes who are also part of the overall Averett campus community. Currently, student-athletes make up 48 percent of the undergraduate population - 53 percent if you count club sports. "We are bringing 500 student-athletes to our campus. They are taking on an academic challenge as well as an athletics one. These are 18-to-22-year-

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olds. So we recruit for character, not characters.”

OTHER ADDITIONS AND SUBTRACTIONS

- **The University of Pittsburgh's Bradford Campus** (Bradford, Pa.) undertook an athletics master plan in the summer of 2020. The campus's perspective is that the “athletics program is a vital social and developmental piece of campus life that promotes diversity and a sense of community for participants and spectators. Student-athletes enhance the campus dynamic by celebrating the human spirit through competition that enlivens, enhances, and activates the pedagogical setting.” Additionally, the campus was looking to upgrade facilities due to increased competition within the division and the opportunity to recruit and retain students. Pitt-Bradford began planning to improve their performance and expand their footprint related to athletics facilities and amenities in three critical categories:
 1. Intercollegiate sports (current and planned)
 2. Club sports (current and planned)
 3. Intramural sports (current and planned)
- **At Alvernia University** (Reading, Pa.), consistent athletics planning, design, and new construction had the university in an enviable situation when studying overall enrollment numbers. However, the gender ratio was unbalanced, reaching numbers close to 2/3 women and 1/3 men, thus their ultimate decision to bring a competitive football program to campus.
- **Lycoming College** (Williamsport, Pa.) understands the critical role that athletics programs play in recruiting talented students and the value they add to the character of a college education. The college is currently advancing a plan to increase the number of athletics programs it sponsors from 17 to 19. By adding lights to extend practice times, a proposed new fieldhouse with lockers/restrooms/training/laundry to support additional participants and the quality of the student-

athlete experience, the college will leverage improvements to a single turf field to realize a stronger recruiting position for both existing programs (soccer and lacrosse) and the addition of field hockey. This is a relatively small capital upgrade with a relatively large impact that will increase field usability while also making room for new student-athletes on campus.

- **Malone University** (Canton, Ohio) eliminated their NCAA Division II football program, freeing up funding for new athletics offerings overall and releasing them from scholarship pressure.

None of these moves would have been possible without thoughtful pivots. Where are your solid contacts and what are your pivot points? What are others in your conference offering? What institutional impacts are needed?

Sproles advises colleges and universities to consider the following impacts when making these pivots:

- Enrollment potential
- Diversity of enrollment
- Gender ratio
- Title IX impacts
- Campus cultural and social impacts
- Current athletics programs and facilities vs. future needs
- Retention rate and academic performance
- Finances

Financial considerations should include hard and soft costs – over time. What are the initial start-up costs including facility needs verses long-term enrollment revenue?

Stevens goes further: “If you are going to add sports, you need to do it the right way for your students and your coaches. Secure up-front donors if at all possible, select the right coaches for your teams, and choose the right sports for your culture.”

McNelly stresses: “Take a deep dive into the numbers – all the numbers.”

The ball is in your hands, the clock is ticking, how will you pivot? •



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THE WAY FOR RETURN TO PLAY

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