

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

July 11, 2008

Small Colleges Sweat Over Sports Facilities

Costs of building boom prompt some leaders to take second look

By Eric Kelderman

With more than four score cheering alumni and administrators watching, Gettysburg College last month broke ground on a \$25-million athletics facility that will feature an eight-lane competition pool, a four-lane warm-up pool, and a state-of-the-art hydrotherapy spa to soothe sore muscles.

In recent years, several of Gettysburg's athletics competitors have built similarly impressive new facilities. Last year McDaniel College, in Westminster, Md., opened a \$4-million fitness center, with roughly 9,000 square feet for exercise equipment and weights, as well as spaces for dance and aerobics classes.

Haverford College, in Haverford, Pa., opened a \$28-million athletics building in 2005, with three competition-level basketball courts and a fitness room with nearly 100 aerobic and strength-training machines.

And in 2001, Ursinus College, in Collegeville, Pa., opened a \$13-million field house big enough for two full-size batting cages, four basketball courts, three tennis courts, a volleyball court, and a six-lane, 200-meter track.

Welcome to the Centennial Conference: 11 small, private liberal-arts colleges in the mid-Atlantic region that belong to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division III, where there are no sports scholarships to lure top-notch players. Instead, the contest to recruit the best athletes — a high-stakes game that has long defined only the marquee Division I programs — has fueled a building boom even in this academic-focused league.

The competition is putting the heat on college leaders to justify the money, and often millions of dollars of debt, that institutions are shelling out for sports. And the costs are straining alumni and students who must make up the difference through donations and fees. In an uncertain economy, some Division III leaders are starting to question whether the overall costs of all the new facilities outweigh their benefits.

Billions for Buildings

Critics often rail against sports spending in the NCAA's Division I, where the expense, scope, and sophistication of new athletics facilities seem to reach new levels each year. While there are no national figures on the number and cost of new sports buildings, it's no secret that fancy arenas, elaborate practice facilities, and jaw-dropping fitness centers have been popping up on campuses across the country — often at the expense of academic buildings.

Big-name programs continue to set the pace with facilities dedicated exclusively to scholarship athletes. Between 2002 and 2007, colleges in the nation's six premier athletics conferences raised nearly \$4-billion for new buildings, with plans to raise \$2.5-billion more in coming years, according to a 2007 *Chronicle* survey.

The building boom has accelerated even at smaller colleges scrambling to hook high-performance athletes. Among the nearly 50 new athletics facilities known to be completed over the past five years, 14 were on campuses of Division III colleges. The average cost of those structures? About \$20-million.

At Division III colleges, the decision to put up new sports buildings is often spurred by the rising expectations of all students, not just athletes, and a need to replace outdated or run-down structures.

"Thirty years ago, you could throw a stack of weights in a room and call it a fitness center," says Adam Hertz, athletic director at Swarthmore College, in Pennsylvania. But now many students are entering college accustomed to the state-of-the-art facilities that have become common in the nation's best high schools and among elite traveling teams.

At Gettysburg, the decision to build a swimming facility arose from dissatisfaction with a cramped, leaky, nearly 50-year-old pool located on the second floor of the student union. The old pool has little spectator seating, and black mold sometimes accumulates on the walls and ceiling.

John A. Fry, president of Franklin & Marshall College, in Lancaster, Pa., says the long-term plan to construct new athletics facilities on his campus arose from a land-use decision. The college's football field and track are near the center of the campus, where administrators would instead like to put more residential and academic buildings.

Franklin & Marshall is also putting new sports buildings on abandoned industrial sites to spruce up the surrounding community, says Mr. Fry, chairman of the NCAA Division III Presidents Council. The college purchased an unsightly scrapyardsite for the \$2.5-million North Campus Athletic Field, which opened in August 2007. The college's master plan calls for nearly all varsity sports facilities to be relocated eventually to the site of a former factory.

Adding top-notch gyms, pools, and other buildings helps institutions draw all kinds of students who are health-conscious and want to exercise, not just athletes, says Janet Morgan Riggs, Gettysburg's interim president. The college has already fostered a strong atmosphere for sports, she points out: Nearly a quarter of its 2,600 students play on one of the 24 varsity teams, and more than three-fourths of its students play on an intramural or club sports team.

To continue to support those students, administrators included plans for a 10,000-square-foot weight and fitness room, and spaces for aerobics, yoga, and other exercise classes in the new facility.

Powerful Tools

Sometimes plans for new athletics buildings are driven by the desire to keep successful coaches who may be tempted by better offers elsewhere, says Ann M. Drummie, a senior project manager for Brailsford & Dunlavey, a consulting firm that assists colleges with construction projects. Unlike coaches at higher levels of college sports, Division III coaches may have to divide their time with teaching. They also don't earn the six- and seven-figure salaries that are becoming common in Division I athletics, she says.

David Wright, athletic director at Gettysburg College, says its swimming coach, Mike Rawleigh, has racked up an impressive record but has never threatened to pursue a job at another institution. Gettysburg's men's and women's teams have won 18 of the 28 Centennial Conference swimming championships since the league was formed in 1993.

However, the coach has expressed his concern that he is losing top athletes because of the subpar pool.

Other campuses have been able to create a "wow factor" with their facilities, Mr. Wright says. "Currently we don't have that."

Thomas Grabiak, who will be a junior at Franklin & Marshall this fall, definitely wasn't wowed by the Gettysburg pool when he visited the campus as a prospective student — he called it "terrible." Mr. Grabiak, who helped lead the Diplomats' swim team to its fourth consecutive conference championship in 2008, earning all-American honors, was "blown away" by the facilities at Franklin & Marshall — a large factor in his decision to attend there.

Even if an older facility has become an eyesore for both current and prospective students, small colleges can struggle to pay for such projects, especially when institutions also have long lists of other maintenance and construction needs. The Gettysburg athletics center was on a list of possible projects when the college raised \$111-million for new buildings between 2001 and 2004. Instead, college leaders decided that a new science building and music conservatory were higher priorities.

What finally got the project off the ground was a \$2-million gift from a 1979 Gettysburg alumnus, Robert A. Ortenzio, once an all-American wrestler at Gettysburg, who is chief executive of Select Medical Corporation, a health-care-management company.

"To be able to attract students and their parents, you have to have a place that's more than just great science buildings and math and labs and the like," Mr. Ortenzio says. "You've got to have places like this where health and fitness and athletics ... really become a big part. And if you don't have it, I think you're at a competitive disadvantage."

Victoria Dowling, Gettysburg's vice president for development, says the college has raised nearly \$9-million of the new center's cost, mostly from private donors, with a goal of bringing in \$10-million to \$15-million by early next year. The Board of Trustees is willing to borrow the remaining amount to finish the project, she says.

Other colleges in the Centennial Conference have also been willing to go into debt for their new sports venues. Ursinus College issued bonds worth more than \$4-million to pay for its new athletics center.

Some of the expense of impressive new facilities is passed on to students. At Gettysburg, to help offset an estimated \$360,000 annual cost for utilities and maintenance of the new center, the Board of Trustees is considering a new student fee of up to \$150, beginning in the 2010-11 academic year.

While added fees got support from students two years ago, current students say they have yet to be informed of any increases. "I think it's hard to justify additional fees," says Hugh D. McStravick, president of the Student Senate.

Questions About Cost

Despite the continuing demand for new sports venues at small colleges, some athletic directors and students question whether the cost and challenges are worthwhile.

Mr. Hertz, of Swarthmore, doesn't believe that facilities are the deciding factor for most students, but acknowledges that many college coaches worry about losing prospective students to a college with better amenities: "I don't think any one of us doesn't look enviously at another institution and wonder if [a new sports structure] is going to impact recruiting."

Meghan Lockard, a 2006 Gettysburg alumna who was a member of the women's swimming team, says that the new facility would probably help recruit strong athletes but that the old pool didn't deter her from attending the college.

"I wonder at what point does all this stuff become irrelevant," says Kathleen Tierney, athletic director at Bryn Mawr College, the Centennial Conference's sole women's college. Athletes are looking at a number of factors when they choose a college, she says, such as the academic programs and the availability of study-abroad programs. "Their primary concern is not the athletics."

Even so, Ms. Tierney says her college is considering an upgrade of its fitness facilities, but with a modest project that fits the scope of a campus of 1,300 undergraduate women and 400 graduate students.

Mr. Fry, president of Franklin & Marshall, says the building frenzy has made all levels of college sports more professional, though he expressed concern that money is sometimes siphoned away from academic projects for sports.

"It's fair to say there is a bit of an arms race in Division III," he says. "You see a lot more spending on athletics, and you wonder if that's the highest and best use of those dollars."