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Big Men on Campus Win Over New Fans

Firm's Designs Are No. 1 With Colleges

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By Amy Joyce, Washington Post Staff Writer

Many colleges and universities around the country know whom to call when they want to build a recreation center or other sports facility on campus. It's District-based architectural-design consultant Brailsford & Dunlavey.

The Brailsford is Paul Brailsford, 40, who has a background in economics and finance and started out as a real estate development consultant. The Dunlavey is Chris Dunlavey, 32, who has an architectural degree and an MBA in real estate development. One of their first projects, before forming B&D, was to help design a recreation center for Tulane University in New Orleans. The only reason Brailsford was chosen to work on the center, he said, was "I looked [physically] fit at the time." He didn't know the first thing about rec centers.

So Brailsford looked at several recreation centers and discovered some common flaws. "Some were terribly oversized; some were undersized for the way they were being utilized," he said. He also noticed that students who were not "ex-high school jocks" weren't using the buildings. But "these were community buildings, and they need to be able to work so that anyone can casually walk in."

The Tulane experience gave Brailsford and Dunlavey direction for their careers and an idea for a business. So five years ago Brailsford and Dunlavey, who had worked together at a real estate consulting firm, decided to take what they knew and start their own business. Their idea was to offer analysis that architects could use in designing buildings. The company surveys likely users of a building to find out what they want before the design process begins.

Looking back, Brailsford and Dunlavey said they endured few of the hardships that most new companies face. Once they had decided what they wanted to do with their company, they drew up a business plan and went to Adams National Bank, which told them they "were either con artists or the best start-up they had seen." The bank gave them a loan to get started in a small office. "We set up shop and just started writing proposals," Brailsford said.

B&D has successfully tapped an underserved market, focusing on college buildings and professional sports arenas. "It's not a very mature industry. . . . We don't run into competitors consistently," Brailsford said. But that doesn't mean there isn't business out there, as evidenced by B&D's growth from a two-person firm with less than \$ 200,000 in annual revenue five years

ago to a 14-person firm with more than \$ 2 million in annual revenue.

The largest part of B&D's client base is colleges and universities looking for help in designing "quality-of-life facilities," such as housing, rec centers and facilities for spectator events. "Those facilities are the experience students will have" outside the classroom, Brailsford said. "More and more universities are using these as recruiting tools."

One of B&D's recent projects was the University of Maryland at College Park's new recreation building, which opened in March. B&D's role was to reevaluate every aspect of the architect's design program. After studying the wishes, living habits and demographics of students and faculty members, B&D revised the allocation of space and offered input about the building site, the building materials and even the furniture.

Alan Resnick, chief designer of the recreation building and a principal at Sasaki Associates, an architecture firm in Watertown, Mass., has worked with B&D since the company started. "They enrich our projects," he said. "They provide an added insight into what makes a successful project . . . they have an added capability of getting at those [quality-of-life] issues."

Architects, he said, often have a limited ability to obtain the kind of information that B&D provides.

Jeffrey Turner, a senior associate at B&D, said: "Before an architect can design [a building], they need to understand a lot of things. It's a much smoother process for the architect when we do it."

Resnick agrees that B&D has found a consulting niche that few other firms have tapped. "I think there are firms that do pieces and parts [of what B&D does], but [B&D] is more comprehensive," he said.

Jay Gilchrist, director of campus recreation services at the University of Maryland, said B&D was a valuable asset in the recreation building project. "They were able to provide us with background information that we may not have had the time to do."

B&D not only provided Gilchrist with information on how to best use the building's space, but it also did a financial plan for the building. "It allowed us to come up with a more concise projection for the first year of operation," said Gilchrist.

Employees at B&D, which has offices on I Street NW, have backgrounds in design and finance. Expertise in the latter helps B&D decide how much "building you can get for what students are willing to pay," Turner said. "We keep a real detailed eye on building revenues."

B&D has clients all over the country. Its first client, DePaul University in Chicago, has rehired B&D to work on a range of campus facilities. Other B&D projects have included the Baltimore Ravens' new stadium -- during construction, B&D looked at how to maximize the stadium's revenue; the Prince George's County sportsplex and learning complex; Washington's Jewish Community Center; and buildings for many other universities, including the University of Cincinnati, San Diego State University and the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

B&D also was hired two years ago to be the sports facility consultant for the state of Ohio. It has done stadium projects for Cincinnati's Bengals football team and Reds baseball team.

Brailsford's goal is to do more projects in the Washington area. "It becomes a little more personal," he said. "To be able to see [our projects] on a regular basis, it's just different."

A LOOK AT ... BRAILSFORD & DUNLAVEY

Founded: 1993

Headquarters: Washington

Number of employees: 14

Revenue: About \$ 2 million

Key clients:

- * University of Maryland
- * Baltimore Ravens
- * San Diego State University
- * DePaul University
- * Prince George's Sports & Learning Complex
- * University of Cincinnati

Number of annual projects: About 40

Average age in the office: Late twenties