Budgets soar, and so do coaches, as colleges beef up recruiting efforts

By LIBBY SANDER

Nearly half of the nation's largest athletics programs have doubled or tripled their recruitment spending over the past decade, as their pursuit of elite athletes intensifies and becomes more national in scope.

Forty-eight percent of NCAA Division I athletics departments at least doubled their recruiting budgets from 1997 to 2007, according to a Chronicle analysis of financial data reported to the U.S. Department of Education. Of the 300 Division I institutions for which data were available, 21 each spent more than $1-million chasing talented players in the 2007 academic year.

On the whole, the 65 biggest spenders shelled out a total of more than $61-million in 2007, an 86-percent increase from 10 years before. That amount does not include salaries for recruiting coordinators or construction and operating costs of the gleaming multimillion-dollar facilities that help lure prospects.

Rising travel costs account for much of the increase. But the budget growth also reflects a widespread shift in how and where coaches recruit, compared with a decade ago.

Driven by geographic constraints or a desire to bolster the competitiveness of their teams — or both — many more coaches now look far beyond homegrown talent, sometimes even crossing continents to court top prospects. For now, the increased price of recruiting is one that many administrators say they can tolerate. But the high-stakes chase for elite athletes can test even the most generous budgets.

"If they've got to spend an extra thousand dollars to get to see a kid somewhere who can make a difference in our program, we want them to do it," says Bill Myers, chief financial officer for athletics at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, which spent $2-million on recruiting in 2007, the most of any institution. "Recruiting is an area we want to invest in."

However, he often reminds coaches, "You're not going to fly on a private plane every time you want to."

The fact that some athletics programs can even contemplate sending coaches on private jets to pursue recruits exposes a disconnect between programs that can, and do, spend to win — and everyone else, says John R. Thelin, a professor of higher education and public policy at the University of Kentucky.

"Just because you can do that doesn't mean you should," he says. At some point, he says, college presidents will have to decide where to draw the line. "It's a more subtle question about values and balance and propriety," he says. "Where does this fit into our mission and our priorities?"
'The Price of Doing Business'

Recruiting budgets vary widely. They fluctuate according to colleges' locations and the depth of talent available in their regions, which can affect how far coaches have to travel to recruit. Budgets also depend on how many teams a college fields and the amount of revenue it pulls in from ticket sales and other sources. And some administrators complain that not all institutions report their recruiting expenses the same way.

Institutions in the six most competitive conferences, and in Division I-A more broadly, spend by far the most on recruiting. But expenses grew even more significantly at Division I-AA and I-AAA institutions, which are a competitive notch below Division I-A and historically have tended to recruit more regionally. Spending on recruiting among programs in Divisions II and III did not grow as fast. (See "Top Spenders in Sports Recruiting," Page A10.)

After Tennessee, the biggest spenders in 2007 were the University of Notre Dame, the University of Florida, Auburn University, Kansas State University, and the University of Georgia.

Kansas State tripled its spending in the past decade as it sought national prominence.

"That's the price of doing business," says Bob Cavello, associate athletic director for business operations. "Why would you want to limit yourself to bring in only people who are from the Midwest?"

Among the 65 biggest football programs — the nation's largest spenders — the University of Maryland at College Park showed the greatest percentage change in its recruiting budget. In the 1997 academic year, it spent $242,000 on recruiting. Ten years later, it spent $912,100.

"The real question is not that we grew so fast," says Larry W. Leckonby, who was chief financial officer for athletics for six years at Maryland before becoming athletic director at the Citadel this month. "We were probably so underfunded 10 years ago, and even five years ago, that we're just barely catching up." A string of successful — and lucrative — seasons in men's basketball, a revived football program, and a new arena that brought increased ticket sales has infused the department with more money to spend on recruiting.

The amount that colleges allocate for recruiting in women's sports, traditionally much smaller than that for men's programs, is also growing. Over the past decade, recruiting budgets in women's sports increased even more than those for overall recruiting expenses. Yet at many institutions, spending for women still lagged far behind the amounts allocated for men's sports. (See "How Women Fare in Athletics Recruiting" on facing page.)

On the Road Again

For most athletics programs, travel — for coaches and prospects alike — is the most expensive part of recruiting. Coaches crisscross the country on commercial airliners, college airplanes, or donor-paid private jets to scout talent, often on short notice. In doing so, they rack up charges for hotels and rental cars as well.

At Tennessee, a busy recruiting period could have some coaches visiting four cities in one week. "A typical per-coach week is around $3,000 to $4,000," says Mr. Myers, the athletics finance officer. At Tennessee and elsewhere, rising gas prices have done little to deter coaches from pounding the recruiting trail.

Athletics departments also pay for the transportation, accommodations, and meals for athletes making official visits. Increasingly, those prospects are traveling to the campuses from much farther away than before.

"Planes, buses, rental cars, food — every one of them is going up," Mr. Leckonby says. "Costs are increasing exponentially every year."
Even so, recruiting accounts for only a small fraction of overall athletics budgets. Among the top 20 spenders in athletics recruiting in 2007, recruiting costs ranged from 1 percent to 3 percent of total athletics spending.

A National Approach

There are many explanations for the increase in spending. Some are as simple as the rising cost of fuel. Others are more complex, and reflect the shifting ambitions of some athletics programs.

At Kansas State, it's a little of both.

Like other large programs wishing to become more competitive for both conference and national championships, Kansas State beefed up its budget after hiring a new coach in a high-profile sport who had an expansive approach to recruiting.

After Ron Prince arrived in Manhattan, Kan., in 2005 to coach the Wildcats' football team, an increase in the program's travel costs soon followed. Unlike previous coaches, who concentrated on recruiting athletes from the Midwest, Mr. Prince has traveled more often, and farther, to bring in nationally sought-after prospects.

Now, while Kansas State's football roster still includes many athletes from Kansas or adjoining states, it also has quite a few from California and Florida. The men's basketball team is even more geographically varied: on the nine-man roster, only two players are from the Midwest, with the rest hailing from Florida, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, and the Washington, D.C., area.

Mr. Cavello, the associate athletic director, attributes part of the shift to the changing profile of the athletics conference in which Kansas State competes. In the mid-1990s, when the Big 12 was still known as the Big Eight, homegrown athletes populated most of its teams. Coaches "would occasionally bring in a young person from California or Florida," he says, "but that would be the rare exception to the rule."

Now the conference reaches from Iowa to Texas, and more coaches are going after athletes outside the region.

Just as coaches are setting their sights farther, so are athletes. "Kids who 20 years ago wouldn't dream of leaving the mid-Atlantic area, they're getting [scholarship] offers around the country," says Mr. Leckonby, formerly of Maryland. "And West Coast kids who would stay in the Pac-10 think nothing of coming East to Duke or Maryland."

But there are obstacles to national recruiting, even for the most ambitious coaches.

At Kansas State, where 54 percent of the university's 350 athletes are from outside the state, that obstacle is location. The nearest major airport, in Kansas City, Mo., is two hours away. And to the dismay of staff members assigned to ferry prospective athletes to and from the airport, the route goes through Lawrence, home of the Wildcats' archrival, the University of Kansas.

The athletics department sometimes leases the university's private airplane for coaches' recruiting trips. (Under an NCAA rule, which Kansas State vigorously opposed, colleges may not use private planes to transport visiting recruits to or from the campus.) But while it may be more convenient, it is hardly cheap: This year it will cost between $450,000 and $500,000.

At Tennessee, the erosion of regional recruiting boundaries has also made recruiting more difficult, and increasingly expensive, for some coaches.

Despite the strength and reputation of its athletics program, the university still relies heavily on out-of-state players to fill its rosters. But any natural recruiting advantages that existed a decade ago because of
geographic proximity have vanished. Last year, for instance, the top football prospect in the state lived in Knoxville, where the university is located. He now plays for Notre Dame.

"We can't take for granted that an in-state kid is going to come here," says Tennessee's Mr. Myers.

Although nobody expects recruiting costs to drop, some administrators predict they may stabilize. At Tennessee, Mr. Myers predicts recruiting expenses will decrease slightly this year, to about $1.7-million.

The willingness of the wealthiest programs to spend more each year to pursue talented athletes, however, will continue to affect all levels of college sports — especially those just a notch below the top, says Mr. Thelin, the Kentucky professor.

"They're like this balloon that's just going to keep ascending," he says of the biggest spenders.

For those athletics programs whose limited finances keep coaches tethered closer to home, there are consequences for trying to keep pace with elite programs. They may have to reach deeper into general funds or raise student fees, potentially fraying relations with administrators and faculty members.

As Mr. Thelin says, "That's where, most likely, the fallout and tensions will take place."

http://chronicle.com
Section: Money & Management
Volume 54, Issue 47, Page A1

Copyright © 2008 by The Chronicle of Higher Education