BERRY IS ADDING FOOTBALL to its strong lineup of varsity sports in the fall of 2013, having received unanimous approval of the Berry College Board of Trustees at its October meeting. After a robust — and sometimes noisy — campus decision-making process, I am confident that this decision positions Berry well for the decades ahead in which external forces far exceed athletic participation.

THE PROCESS

Over the last decade, Berry has deliberately increased the number of varsity sports as part of a strategic commitment to enhance the college’s reputation as a top-tier residential college. At this point, football is the only major sport that Berry does not offer. Residential institutions often emphasize athletic participation as an integral part of the campus experience and encourage student athletes to be broadly involved in campus life. This culture of participation, rendered invisible by the absence of athletic scholarships, defines Division III of the NCAA, which is why most liberal arts institutions belong in this division and why Berry joined in 2009.

The issue of football was considered briefly at Berry about seven years ago, but a study was postponed in order to focus on the need for upgraded facilities and expanded opportunities for women. The process of studying football began in earnest in 2010, two years after the administration was formed. In spring 2011, Berry retained a consulting firm with experience in the start-up of Division III football programs to provide a formal review of program needs and costs. As part of their review, the consultants interviewed more than 90 people representing all parts of the Berry community. The plan was to present the consultants’ report to the Board of Trustees at its May meeting, develop a refined cost projection for Berry during the summer, and then submit all of this material for open consideration by the Board, however the question of football took on new urgency. In joining Division III, one of our hopes and goals was to be accepted as a member of the Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference (SCAC), a group of 12 highly regarded colleges and universities extending from Georgia and Kentucky to Texas and Colorado. After several years of inquiries and overtures from us, a group of the SCAC’s eastern members approached Berry about joining them in forming a new conference. The one stipulation was that Berry had to agree to add football and make that decision within two weeks (by the end of May).

While it was Berry’s good fortune to be in the midst of a football study, our board determined it inappropriate to make such a decision without completing the on-campus review process. Thankfully, the other members of the new conference affirmed this principle, and Berry joined them as a charter member of the Southern Athletic Association, which commences play in 2012. The on-campus discussion then ensued as planned.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In the early stages of review, campus visitors expressed concern about the timing, specifically during October, and an improved male-to-female ratio was cited as the primary benefit of adding football. As the game tends to be a social experience as well as an athletic event, football at Berry added many opportunities to have parents, alumni and friends on campus in the early fall and to build additional appropriate events around the game. Campus culture and cost were the areas of greatest concern. People at Berry care about its special culture and want to protect it. The selection of the right head coach, in order for Berry to be successful in football at Berry, will not be enough just to endorse Berry’s mission; the right coach must be a champion for Berry’s campus culture. (By way of update, we had already received letters of interest from 65 candidates prior to release of the position description in early January.)

Operating costs for the football program are estimated at $600,000 per year (including coaching and related staff salaries as well as uniforms, insurance and game-day expenses). These expenses will be offset by the tuition (less regular financial aid) generated by the net revenue for the football program. As an example, if the team loses all 10 of its games, operating costs are estimated to be covered by $1,000,000 in revenue. In the end, after considering all factors, our board approved the addition of football largely because it believes that Berry’s continued success will be enhanced through long-term affiliation with the colleges and universities that are members of the Southern Athletic Association.

The unique history of football at Berry includes a long-running Mountain Day rivalry between the Georgian and Sycamore campus literary societies (seen here in the 1972 Cabin Log). The tradition of a football game for a campus event dates as far back as John Berry’s high school boys from playing baseball, football and

THE CONTEXT

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