It takes a team

BY BILL WAGNON

Much of this issue of ‘Southern magazine is devoted to our growing student body—more specifically to the ever-changing and often-complicated process of recruiting prospective students. The Office of Admission drives this process, but you’ll also find out as you read this issue that it is very much a “team” effort. It’s a little cliché-ish (like the title of this column), but it’s the truth, and teamwork is important to the college’s recent (and future) successes.

I just started my 11th year at Birmingham-Southern in September, and I just got what I’ll call my first BSC recruit. Sure, the work of the BSC Communications Office of which I’m a member affects the college’s recruiting efforts in a very positive way. But, as an individual, I haven’t been able to say that I’ve personally recruited a student to BSC. That is until now.

It’s not like I haven’t tried. I consider myself a great ambassador for Birmingham-Southern. I talk about BSC everywhere I go. The main beneficiaries of my sage advice on BSC are the parents on my children’s soccer teams. I tell a good BSC story during our many soccer travels. It’s hard not to talk about this place when I’m out and about, mostly because when people find out I work for Birmingham-Southern, they initiate the conversation. It seems that everyone has a relative who graduated from the Hilltop, or a son or daughter who they hope looks at BSC when considering a college, or a neighbor who is a BSC graduate and a successful (insert career choice here).

Last fall I reconnected with my best friend from college after some 25 years. At the time, his oldest son was a high school senior, and just beginning to seriously look at colleges. I don’t think Birmingham-Southern was even on his radar. Like so often happens, the young man was looking at his father’s (and my) alma mater—a large public institution (name omitted here to protect the innocent). One day our discussion turned to BSC’s new Division III football team. You see, this young man was a good high school football player. Not necessarily a Division I prospect with aspirations of the National Football League, but a good solid player who loved the game. More importantly, he was a very good student and an even better person with merit-scholarship caliber test scores, high GPA, and a penchant for community service. He was, as we say, the right fit for Birmingham-Southern. Hopefully, I thought at the time, BSC would be the right fit for him.

Suddenly, getting this young man to Birmingham-Southern became my obsession. It was no longer personal (although deep down I needed this conquest). This young man needed to be at BSC; Birmingham-Southern needed this young man. My colleague Sheri Salmon (dean of enrollment management) always says that our chances of getting any prospective student to attend Birmingham-Southern greatly increase if we can get them to visit campus. My next goal was to get my recruit to campus. Let me pause and make it understood that I’m not taking anything away from the admission counselor or the assistant football coach who also recruited this young man. But for the purposes of my column, he’s going to be my recruit! My recruit and his family visited campus for the 2008 Homecoming game vs. Sewanee. And as Sheri so aptly predicted, they were sold.

The young man in question is now a freshman at BSC, and I’m pleased to report that he’s already making an impact on the football field as a member of the Panther varsity. But this is not a story about football. This is a story about fit. This young man is not at BSC to pursue a career in football. He is here to get the best education he can, and getting to play the game he loves while doing so is just icing on the cake. His dad, my college friend, told me a couple of weeks ago, “This is the best decision this family has ever made.”

I’m proud that he came to Birmingham-Southern, but the bragadocio above is all in fun. I’m more proud because this place fits him, and he fits this place. That’s what makes it all worthwhile.

This is also a story about teamwork. So now I’m on to my next conquest, my next future BSC student. I’m going after his younger brother, a high school junior and a heck of a student and young man. Oh, and that he happens to be a standout baseball player is just coincidence.

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