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### Spellmann & Sports

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HIST 20100: Historical Methods

Dr. Kris Smith

April 21, 2024

### Spellmann & Sports

The year is 1990, Lindenwood College is struggling financially and are looking for a new president to increase enrollment and bring Lindenwood out of her financial hardships. Enter Dennis Spellmann, though he had been involved with the college for a few years prior on the board and as interim president, he took official hold of the helm in 1990 as president. Under his guise, he sought measures to increase enrollment at the school by putting a larger emphasis in athletics. Throughout the 1990s, he expanded the athletics department and required student-athletes to live on campus (and charge room & board) among other measures. Without Spellmann taking these crucial steps in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it would be hard to see where Lindenwood would be today. Spellmann's emphasis on athletic expansion within Lindenwood College was vital to the success of the campus and saving Lindenwood from shutting its doors.

Spellmann was notable when it came to saving struggling campuses, "Gaining rapid fame as a bankruptcy and turnaround expert, he proceeded to bail out a string of Presbyterian, rural and historically black colleges across the country, flying from one to the other and descending like a god to overhaul the books, the payroll and the enrollment."<sup>1</sup> This trend of saving colleges would continue to his involvement with Lindenwood in 1989. But the U.S. Department of Education caught on and began to audit two universities he was formerly involved in, Missouri

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<sup>1</sup> Jeannette Batz, "The Talented Mr. Spellmann," Riverfront Times, September 6, 2000, <https://www.riverfronttimes.com/news/the-talented-mr-spellmann-2473785>.

Valley College and Tarkio College, and found that students were being brought in on prequalified federal loans and told they were athletic or academic scholarships. These same students would ultimately drop out of college or default on payments, and the colleges were able to claim the student body numbers and keep the funds.<sup>2</sup>

At the turn of the decade, Lindenwood was struggling financially and addressed that in the 1989 Annual Report, “At the beginning of the year, continuing financial problems brought into question the ability of the institution to continue as a vital force in independent higher education within this region.”<sup>3</sup> But when Spellmann came, he built out an administrative team and plan that would reverse Lindenwood College’s direction. Spellmann placed a substantial emphasis in two areas, increasing the student population and increasing our athletics department, these two actions were seen as mutually exclusive, “Two new sports joined the roster of Lindenwood athletics in 1989: football and women's volleyball. The Lions football team pounced into action with an undefeated premier season, marking the start of a new Lindenwood tradition.”<sup>4</sup> By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Lindenwood had increased its athletic presence to 28 total teams in 1999, up from roughly 8 teams heading into the 1990 academic year.

Spellmann made visible efforts to increase admissions to the campus, “At the beginning of the 1999-2000 academic year in the Fall of 1999, Lindenwood enrolled 3402 full-time undergraduates”<sup>5</sup>, an increase from 739 full-time students in 1989<sup>6</sup>, a 360% increase in ten years.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Burton, “Educational Ploy : Some Small Colleges Survived by Lining up Very Needy ‘Students,’” ed. Wall Street Journal, *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Lindenwood College, “1989 Lindenwood College Annual Report,” Lindenwood College Annual Report, January 1, 1989, [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/president\\_reports/17/](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/president_reports/17/).

<sup>4</sup> Lindenwood College, “1990 Lindenwood College Annual Report,” Lindenwood College Annual Report, January 1, 1990, [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/president\\_reports/18/](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/president_reports/18/).

<sup>5</sup> Lindenwood University, “Comprehensive Student Assessment Program: 1999-2000,” Reports & Self-Studies, April 1, 2000, 6, <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/self-studies/13/>.

<sup>6</sup> Lindenwood College, “1989 Lindenwood College Annual Report,” *Lindenwood College Annual Report*, January 1, 1989, [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/president\\_reports/17/](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/president_reports/17/).

Many of these new students being involved with athletics teams, were required to live on campus per Lindenwood College's guidelines which allowed them to charge room and board, only further bringing the college out of her financial struggles. It can be argued that Spellmann believed that one of the biggest ways to get Lindenwood out of trouble was through the emphasis on athletics, as it was seen around the country that some of the most profitable and wealthy schools were deeply immersed in the athletics world.

Collegiate sports play a vital role in admissions to the college or university, it's one of the biggest ways that a college can market itself on the national scale. It gives universities an often powerful opportunity to reach those who might not have otherwise remembered or considered the institution.<sup>7</sup> In essence, it was also a marketing tool used by Spellmann in an attempt to increase registration. Not only did it allow the school to recruit a wider range of students, athletes primarily, but student registration fluctuates heavily with sports, "under most circumstances notable increases occurred in admissions applications received, both in absolute terms and also relative to peer schools, in the year of and over the three years following the championship season"<sup>8</sup>.

With the new population of student athletes, the administration under Spellmann made it a requirement for all student athletes to live on campus. This was a notable change as addressed by the 1999 President's Report, which saw an increase in total student body from 1,225 in 1989 to 9,488 in 1999, 230 of these students being residents in 1989 to 1,743 in 1999.<sup>9</sup> Overall, there

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<sup>7</sup> J Douglas Toma and Dennis A Kramer, *The Uses of Intercollegiate Athletics : Opportunities and Challenges for the University* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 45–48.

<sup>8</sup> J Douglas Toma and Dennis A Kramer, *The Uses of Intercollegiate Athletics : Opportunities and Challenges for the University* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 45–48.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis Spellmann, "1999 Lindenwood University President's Report," *Lindenwood University President's Report*, January 1, 1999, 6, [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/president\\_reports/24/](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/president_reports/24/).

was a 675% in total student body and 657% increase in residential students in the decade under Spellmann, this can be argued as a result of the emphasis focused into the athletics department.

Athletics themselves generally came at a cost to the university, as there is normally a reliance on them to produce revenue from other avenues. Sportswriter Kevin Blackstone traced the issue of collegiate athletics back to money, “the root of the problem is money. And money has corrupted college sports... between what is a revenue-generating operation in college athletics placed under the umbrella of a nonprofit institution of higher education.”<sup>10</sup> It was seen as a business by many, not profitable for the most part as stated by Robert H. Frank in a ‘winner-take-all arms race’:

The logic of competition in winner-take-all markets suggests that participants in these markets are likely to experience much less favorable economic results than they had expected at the outset. Upward biased estimates of success will tempt more institutions to enter than would be warranted by the logic of profit and loss. And each institution, once entered, will face powerful incentives to increase its expenditures in search of a competitive edge.<sup>11</sup>

The lucrative push to be great in athletics in hopes that it would yield stronger recruitment was a thought shared by many colleges around the country. And it varied in stages, from joining conferences through NAIA or any NCAA division as well as moving up a division. Sometimes the juice was worth the squeeze, such as Lindenwood joining the NAIA American Midwest Conference in 1993 and the student body population skyrocketing. And sometimes it was just too much, such as Lindenwood transitioning to Division I in 2022 and having to cut 10 athletic teams due to costs associated with the shift.

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<sup>10</sup> Christian K. Anderson and Amber C. Fallucca, *The History of American College Football Institutional Policy, Culture, and Reform* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 188.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Frank, “May 2004 - Challenging the Myth: A Review of the Links among College Athletic Success, Student Quality, and Donations,” Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, May 1, 2004, <https://www.knightcommission.org/2004/05/challenging-the-myth-a-review-of-the-links-among-college-athletic-success-student-quality-and-donations/>.

Academics played an important role in the shift too, some were upset about the transition away from the academic heritage of Lindenwood to a more athletics orientated college as noted by some anonymous student protest papers such as the Black Squirrel Papers, “Soon enough we’ll have a marching band to go with the brand new football team. Some call it a nightmare, others, a dream.”<sup>12</sup> This was backed by a study conducted in 1989 by the American Institutes for Research that found that compared to other students participating in time-consuming extracurricular activities, college athletes have lower grade point averages and more issues related to mental health, physical health, and alcohol and drug use.<sup>13</sup> This was not the set of standards that Lindenwood was founded on back in 1832, and a few students and faculty made that known.

Glossing over the fact that some faculty and students were upset about the shift, one cannot deny the profound impact that Dennis Spellmann and his emphasis on athletics had for Lindenwood College in the 1990s. His administration saved the school from closing its doors and was able to successfully turn the campus profitable for a few years while increasing the student body by over 500% as well as the total residential body by over 500%. Without Spellmann, Lindenwood would’ve been another college that would’ve just belonged to the pages of history.

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<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, “The Black Squirrel Manifesto,” *The Black Squirrel Manifesto*, January 1, 1989, [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/black\\_squirrel/4/](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/black_squirrel/4/).

<sup>13</sup> American Institutes for Research and Center for the Study of Athletics and National Study of Intercollegiate Athletes, *Summary Results from the 1987-88 National Study of Intercollegiate Athletes* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Center for the Study of Athletics, 1988).

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