



"We're fighting the athletic battle the same way we fought the Vietnam War — we're not going in it to win. We throw just enough resources in to keep our heads above the water. We make a lot of waves about being very tough academically to the point of being absurd. Why do we have to make an excuse that we're so different from the rest of the world? If we're that different, then we belong in Division III."

VIC LAW, professor of chemical engineering and member of University Senate committee on athletics

"Some of our athletes are people for whom Tulane is a big change from high school and some are those for whom Tulane is not that big a change. But they work very hard, and in terms of sink or swim, they swim."

ANDREA TALENTINO, instructor in political science

"I have a degree from Harvard and I can tell you Harvard will give some preferential treatment to individuals who show athletic superiority ... Everyone wants good athletes."

RICHARD CULBERTSON, associate professor public health



STAFF PHOTO BY MATT ROSE

**"We know there are players we can't sign or won't sign that could help us on Saturdays. But you can't think of it as restrictions."**

CHRIS SCelfo, Tulane football coach

#### ACADEMICS, from D-4

and his successor, Sandy Barbour, also made several improvements to the school's academic support system. Athletes in the program started performing better in the classroom, which enabled Dickson, who became athletic director in 2000, to seek increases in the number of exceptions.

Several restrictions remain. Special admissions prospects must go before a faculty committee and Tulane will not admit partial qualifiers, athletes who have either the minimum standardized test score or grade-point average, but not both. The partial-qualifier ban puts Tulane at odds with the rest of Conference USA, with the exception of football-only member Army.

Non-qualifiers can even enroll at schools like Southern Mississippi where tuition, room and board for a year is \$8,100 and gain eligibility after a year while Tulane's admission policies and (prohibitive costs which are in excess of \$30,000) make that virtually impossible. Also, junior college signees are rare because of the difficulty in accumulating enough transferable hours to be eligible.

"You always would like ways to supplement your team," Scelfo said. "But we can't worry about what we don't have."

Similarly, men's basketball coach Shawn Finney said the restrictions are something he has learned to deal with.

"It's a factor you have to deal with to get kids in here," he said. "But any place you coach you've got to sign kids who can do the work."

And sometimes you don't. Finney signed local basketball standout Derek Burditt even though his test scores were far below NCAA minimums. Burditt retook the test but was still a non-qualifier and is now in a Florida junior college.

"He was a local kid we wanted in our program, but unfortunately for him, it didn't work out," Finney said. "There's always a risk and reward involved and sometimes you have to lay yourself out there."

Women's basketball coach Lisa Stockton said she feels Tulane's academic image is a positive in her recruiting.

"Sure, there are student-athletes who might be intimidated by our academics," he said. "But I think there are so many good players out there to whom academics is important that

it hasn't hurt our program."

Dickson said that, while he thinks C-USA is hurting itself by not limiting partial qualifiers, Tulane can nonetheless be competitive within the league.

"We have a different formula from the others, except Army, so we've got to be very good within our formula," he said. "We pride ourselves in signing kids who are good student-athletes, and we hold ourselves accountable for how we succeed with them as student-athletes."

Dickson also said he favors the proposed new NCAA standards that would increase the number of core courses required for freshman eligibility as well as the number of hours earned toward graduation after athletes are in school.

The majority of freshmen athletes begin in University College, which many students attend on a part-time basis and which advertises itself as having an open admissions policy — although athletes admitted as exceptions still are subject to NCAA eligibility rules.

But school officials point out that University College should no longer carry the stigma from several decades ago, when it was viewed as a haven for athletes because they would not have to face the same academic standards as those in other divisions of the school.

"What people may not appreciate is the tremendous acceleration in the credentials of Tulane students," Cowen said. "If you look at the academic profile of University College, that profile almost looks like the profile for the entire university a decade or so ago."

That's not lost on Elpheage. "It took me a while to get used to it all, especially the reading, and all of the other time you have to put in," Elpheage said. "And there's still times the teacher says something and I don't know what he's talking about and everybody else does."

Still, Elpheage takes pride in his accomplishments and talks of plans to be part of a high graduation rate in a future year.

"We're not just jocks here," he said. "We put in our time for football and for school and we're serious about both."

"They don't give you anything here either. You have to earn it."

Ted Lewis can be reached at [tlewis@timespicayune.com](mailto:tlewis@timespicayune.com) or 826-3405.

## Tulane facing challenge of attracting football fans

TULANE, from D-1

with a chance at a perfect record, the crowd at the Superdome was announced at 37,391. Tulane averaged 27,984 that year in paid attendance for home games.

Another challenge: With a prestigious academic reputation, Tulane insists its athletes also be students. The school boasts one of the highest graduation rates in the nation for athletes. Yet it is at a recruiting disadvantage to schools in its own league, since C-USA does not require uniform academic standards among its member institutions.

Then there is the money. Tulane is no different from the majority of other Division I-A schools, where dramatic increases in spending for facilities and coaches' salaries, not to mention the demands of gender equity, have created unprecedented financial pressures.

For the person responsible for charting the course of Tulane athletics, it can seem overwhelming.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm trying to move a mountain that hasn't moved in about 50 years," said Rick Dickson, Tulane's athletic director since 2000.

And yet, despite the numerous challenges, there is a distinct air of optimism about the program, easily the most in more than 20 years. In Dickson, Tulane supporters believe they've landed the leader the school has needed, a long-term planner who has a vision of what the Tulane athletic program can be.

"I think we're doing all right," said Larry Israel, a member of the Board of Administrators whose family has been involved in Tulane affairs for decades. "We've got a very competent group of coaches and administrators, especially Rick Dickson."

"He's something special — the best we've ever had. People sometimes get too pumped up or too down about football, but when you look at all our sports, we're better off than we've ever been."

#### Making strides

Indeed, while fans often judge college programs by high-profile sports such as football and basketball, a close look at all sports shows Tulane is having a relatively high level of success on the playing field.

In the seven years since Conference USA came into being, Tulane ranks third in the conference in NCAA appearances in all sports, fourth in tournament championships and fifth in regular-season championships.

The memories of the school's 2001 College World Series appearance are still fresh. The women's basketball team has made eight straight NCAA Tournament appearances. The football team is 5-3 headed into Saturday's homecoming game against Navy at Tad Gormley Stadium.

The program is doing even better in the classroom. Recent NCAA graduation rates reports ranked Tulane 11th among Division I-A schools for all athletes (70 percent) and tied for fifth in football (80 percent).

Financially, while Tulane's athletic department will run a deficit projected at \$1.6 million in real dollars this year, school president Scott Cowen has said that is an acceptable level that the rest of the university can support. Furthermore, giving to the athletic department, especially on the grassroots level, is up significantly and Dickson has put a major effort into developing new major contributors.

Also, after a year's delay, a major renovation to the baseball stadium is expected to begin next summer.

Even long-simmering faculty

hostility toward athletics, stemming mostly from a men's basketball scandal in the 1980s, has slowly faded.

Perhaps most important, there seems to be an acceptance by most supporters of the realities that Tulane faces in finding its niche. If Tulane athletics aren't what they were 50 years ago, they're better than they have been in a long time.

"I think we're in pretty good shape for the conference we're in."

**"If we can get to just one or two bowl games per decade and be competitive in other sports, especially baseball, I'm a happy customer because I know exactly what I'm dealing with."**

AL FERRO, fan

said Gary Roberts, the school's faculty athletic representative and a noted authority in sports law. "I'm proud of where we are, especially when you consider where we've come from."

"You don't see our kids getting arrested every week. We don't have football players raping girls in the dorm. We've got good kids who go to school."

Or as fan Al Ferro puts it, "You have to play with the cards you're dealt. If we can get to just one or two bowl games per decade and be competitive in other sports, especially baseball, I'm a happy customer because I know exactly what I'm dealing with."

#### Special events

Yet a college athletic program, regardless of its relative level of success, cannot thrive without support.

Dickson is pursuing a strategy of using special events, either due to novelty or the name of the opponent, to attract a generation of lost fans, a situation created as much by changing times and changing demographics of the school and the community as a lack of competitive success, especially in football.

"The city responds to events," he said. "You create a buzz, get people to come to events, and then hope they become regulars."

"When you're trying to pump some lifeblood into a program that needs lifeblood, you look at the options available and the options you can create."

Dickson's event getting the most attention happens Saturday with the homecoming football game against Navy. It's the Green Wave's first outdoor home game since the school abandoned Tulane Stadium for the Superdome in 1975.

The outdoor setting will enable fans to do what they can't at the Superdome — enjoy open-flame tailgating in the shade of the City Park oaks. There'll also be a parade through Roosevelt Mall and several other pre-game activities.

"That's what we've missed as a community," said Steve Ballard, who played wide receiver at Tulane from 1989-92. "Part of the experience of going to a football game should be breaking bread, partying and com-

municating with people.

"You do that and you build relationships; you build support for the program. At Tulane, we've lost touch with that."

Dickson agrees.

"The level of interest in our community, especially our support base, has been dormant for decades," he said. "I think a lot of it ties back to the time we gave up our facility and with it a lot of deep passion and tradition."

"We've lost a generation, possibly two. This is chance to turn back the clock, hopefully recapture some ones we've lost and possibly attract the piece we've missed — young families coming with their kids."

Dickson's "special events" philosophy has included previous home football games this season against Southern and Texas that both drew announced crowds of more than 40,000, the baseball game against LSU in the Superdome this spring that drew an NCAA record crowd of more than 24,000 and an upcoming basketball game against Kentucky in the New Orleans Arena.

The Gormley game has raised speculation that it could be a test run that could result in the school funding a renovation of the stadium to use for most if not all of its home games or perhaps building its own off-campus facility. An on-campus stadium has been deemed all-but-impossible.

However, that does not appear to be the case, except for holding homecoming there annually.

The Superdome, according to Cowen, is not a good venue for college football because of its off-campus location and the fact that most Tulane crowds are swallowed up in it. But it appears to be the only available option.

"It is highly unlikely that in my lifetime at this institution we will ever build a stadium anywhere," Cowen said. "You are speaking about spending tens of millions of dollars to do that while I feel quite honestly those dollars can be better used for better purposes at the institution."

"Now if a donor came and said, 'Here's \$60 million and the only way you can use it is for a new stadium,' then you might think twice about it. But short of that, we wouldn't do it."

Still, the idea is out there.

"We need a campus-like environment," said John Koerner, chairman of the Board of Administrators. "The shade and greenery of City Park might fill that role."

"We have to see what kind of feedback we get from this game, and then we'd have to modernize Gormley. But I promise you, we could raise the money."

More feasible is a multipurpose arena, seating about 8,000, which would be built in the area along Claiborne now occupied by Rosen Hall if those students could be relocated. Such a facility is part of a master building plan, but Cowen said realistically it is at least five or six years away.

#### Finding fans

Getting more people to come to whatever facility Tulane is playing in is another matter.

The core fan base isn't growing. When Tulane draws 30,000 or more fans to a football game, it may be maximizing its audience.

Of the school's 105,000 living alumni, about 30 percent live within 100 miles of New Orleans. And that number is likely to drop: The percentage of Tulane undergraduates from Louisiana is currently at about 20 percent, meaning the local alumni total will only decline in future years.

See TULANE, D-7

### GRADUATING ATHLETES

C-USA's Marquette, Tulane among nation's best

#### CONFERENCE USA GRADUATION RATES

School	All Athletes	All Students	Football	Men's Basketball
Marquette	77	73	NA	69
Tulane	70	73	80	64
Saint Louis	70	66	NA	38
DePaul	65	58	NA	30
East Carolina	59	51	49	29
Charlotte	56	50	NA	36
TCU	56	63	44	23
Cincinnati	53	45	41	17
Southern Miss	52	51	56	30
Memphis	51	32	51	0
South Florida	50	46	NA	25
UAB	49	34	54	43
Louisville	44	31	34	10
Houston	32	36	28	0

Percentages are for freshmen entering school between 1992 and 1995. Army does not reveal its graduation rates.

