

Athletics Directors Association BUILDING A CULTURE OF CONFIDENCE TAKES TIME

I was named director of athletics June 19, 2007, at Texas A&M University Commerce. With a supportive administration by my side, and a room filled to capacity, this was the first press conference the university had for athletics. The culture in the past was to hire employees in athletics and put the information on the website. The culture changed with my encouragement to my future president that this new practice of having press conferences become a standard procedure on our campus for others to follow in athletics. It was important to me to have this discussion because in professional development leadership institutes it was always stressed that “you have to win the press conference.” I knew without having a press conference my vision for the athletics department would be very difficult. Collaboration and building the confidence in my administration was the key to the press conference’s success.



Carlton Cooper



After several visits to the campus and city of Commerce, I started my new position with great enthusiasm and anticipation. I felt I was extremely prepared knowing the number of professional experiences I had and the great mentors who provided continuous leadership for me. I was ready for my new opportunity to lead and develop my own athletics program.

An athletics director at any college level demands integrity, trust, synergy, strong conscience and the ability to be a positive leader. I have witnessed several of these qualities in many of the people at Texas A&M University Commerce.

As a former student-athlete there are several lessons that I hold close to heart and exercise in my day-to-day operation. It is important to me that I work as hard as I can, work by the rules, and complete, not compete, with my teammates. With this thorough process as an athletics director, I will develop my team within the athletics department and outside of the department as well. It was in my first year of leadership, that although there were many successes in the classroom, the performance of our athletic teams and in the area of finance was lacking. There were still many challenges in the area of scholarships, facility upgrades, personnel and game attendance. A more difficult challenge came from community buy-in and the opportunities to have growth with corporate supporters and donors. I had been given information from prominent and not so prominent constituents that the athletics department was not

reaching out to them and the end result was they were reluctant to support the program.

Knowing I was coming into a university that struggled with community, alumni and corporate outreach, I found myself working to find key people within each of these areas to share my vision and start repairing the relationships. It also was important to find those key individuals on campus that I knew would provide assistance and knowledge to the issue at hand. With change being put in place to take the program to the next level, I may have been blinded by my pride as a former student-athlete and my admiration of others who played and built the foundation at East Texas State University, now Texas A&M University Commerce. My approach to moving the program was to reconnect and build relationships with the alumni and build on the success that I knew East Texas State has had as a foundation to move forward.

In the effort to move the athletics program forward there had to be some significant changes. Raising the cost of tickets to home events, increasing the cost of advertisement within game programs and scoreboards, as well as closing facilities to public use were all met with criticisms, however, there was praise given to efforts made to increase institutional control, academic enhancement, the purchase of the second largest video board in NCAA Division II, new stadium seating for football and track facility, a new throwing area and the hiring of experienced staff. One of the most challenging and best collaborative efforts with campus was the passing of the first athletics fee. To accomplish this when it failed the first time was a testament to the group efforts of many campus officials and the initial buy-in from the university president

I knew the changes that needed to be done would be challenging and a real learning experience so I have kept my focus on the people I have surrounded myself with. None of us thought that building a culture of confidence and change would be easy or fast. It can all begin with great promise and you still face unexpected obstacles, unanticipated delays and critics that pop up at the wrong time. Success for Texas A&M University Commerce continues as the notoriety of our brand grows and collaboration with alumni, campus, conference, and community is stronger than ever.

It will not always work the way you want it to.

You will not always get buy-in.

Carlton Cooper is the director of athletics at Texas A&M University Commerce and a member of the DII ADA Board of Directors.