On the recruiting trail

Turf students, not athletes, get red-carpet treatment at Rutgers.

While his counterparts in the athletic department are checking out 40-yard dash times of prospective wide receivers, Richard Hurley, Ph.D., an adjunct faculty member at Rutgers University’s Cook College, is scrutinizing SAT scores of top high school and junior college students. While his colleagues measure vertical leaps, Hurley is gauging students’ interest in turfgrass science and their abilities to perform to high academic standards.

Hurley, a former vice president of research for Lofts Seed Co. and longtime teacher at Rutgers, is the designated recruiter for the undergraduate teaching program in turfgrass management at Cook College.

“This is a pioneering effort to attract the very best students into our classrooms and research facilities,” says Bruce Clarke, Ph.D., director of Rutgers’ Center for Turfgrass Science, “and Rich is the perfect person to carry it out. He has had tremendous success in private industry, knows the green industry well, has extensive contacts throughout the world and has been able to place students in fabulous golf course internships like Augusta National in Georgia and St. Andrews in Scotland.”

“Our objective is not quantity but quality,” says Hurley, who has been recruiting students to Rutgers for four years. “A school’s legacy is what attracts students to a university, especially the undergraduate and graduate students who are going to be future industry leaders and academicians.”

The few, the proud

Hurley contacts high school guidance counselors and golf coaches in New Jersey, New York, Connecti-
cut, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware, sending them information about Rutgers and suggesting that if a student loves golf, turfgrass studies may be a career path for them. He’s looking for 1,100 or higher SAT scores and an interest in turfgrass science. Also on his radar screen are students at two New Jersey community colleges — Mercer and Morris — with particularly strong two-year horticulture/landscaping programs.

Prospective students visiting most universities are often met by a student who is paid to give them a generic tour of the campus. At Rutgers, would-be turfgrass students get the red-carpet treatment. Hurley even meets with their families and personally escorts the students on a wide-ranging tour of their specific areas of interest at Rutgers’ Cook College campus in New Brunswick, N.J.; introduces them to faculty, researchers and students; and invites them to sit in on classes if they’d like.

“When students contact us, their information comes to me and I immediately communicate with them and invite them to the campus for a tour,” Hurley says. “They get a much more personal touch, and we offer the very best students a scholarship right out of high school, just like a football player might get.”

“Our program has plenty of selling points,” he says. “How many universities have 25 turf-related researchers, including eight full-time faculty, dedicated to turfgrass science? Or three turf research farms? Rutgers has the largest cool-season turfgrass breeding program in the world, and it generates a significant amount of money from royalties that come back to our turf program.

“We also have a staff member, Brad Park, fully devoted to sports turf. And our Geiger Turfgrass Education Center, dedicated in 2001 by the New Jersey turfgrass industry, houses the plant diagnostic laboratory and nematode detection service and contains a turfgrass library; a large classroom; a small computer classroom; and an executive boardroom. Students and leaders from statewide turfgrass organizations meet there all the time.

“I’m confident when students see all we have to offer, we have a great shot at getting them to enroll here.”

**Money talks**

To further distinguish Rutgers’ program, the turfgrass team at Cook College has put together a $75,000-a-year scholarship pool, with individual scholarships ranging from $500 to $3,000 — all renewable, depending on the student’s academic performance.

Since it was established in 1983, the Peter Loft Scholarship alone has granted more than $400,000 in turfgrass scholarships, including $24,000 in 2003. Other aid comes from more than a dozen sponsors, including the GCSA of New Jersey, the New Jersey Turfgrass Foundation, New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association, Rutgers Turfgrass Alumni Association, Paul Deschamps Scholarship, Ralph Geiger Scholarship, Duke Polidor Memorial Scholarship, New Jersey State Golf Association Caddie Scholarship, Ralph Engel Scholarship, the Rutgers Center for Turfgrass Science, and major corporations such as Bayer and Cleary Chemical.

“More than 60 of our undergraduate, graduate and two-year certificate program students received turfgrass scholarships this year. That’s pretty im-
pressive,” Hurley says.

Proof is in the pudding
Is the recruiting working? Absolutely, according to the students themselves.

Sophomore Alex Tekulsky from Long Island, a Geiger scholar, says he was sold on Rutgers by “a combination of things. They place their graduates all over the world, plus it’s one of the most well-known programs in the country, and they provided me with a great scholarship. They made me feel like this was the place for me to be.”

“When I went to visit universities, Rutgers was the only one where I actually met with turf professors,” says Lauren Giordano, a former president of the Rutgers Turf Club who graduated last year and spent one semester at the Old Course at St. Andrews in Scotland. “I actually met with Dr. Clarke, and he and the other professors I met seemed as interested in me as I was in them. That was why I chose Rutgers.

“I have four professors’ numbers on my cell phone. I consider them all my friends.”

“We’re already sure of a half dozen terrific students that we have recruited for the next academic year,” Clarke says. “We don’t want high numbers; we want quality. Rutgers is known for our exceptional graduate-degree program. We intend to duplicate that in our undergraduate program. Already, we’ve made marked strides toward that goal.”

“We have some students with 1,300 SATs and excellent high school grade point averages. Those are really strong credentials,” Hurley says. “When you identify these kids in high school who want to be in the green industry, they excel academically.”

One of those students is freshman Christopher Skvir, who says he was sold on Rutgers during his senior year at Delran (N.J.) High School “by the attention they gave me.”

“The day I visited was extremely hot outside and Dr. Hurley gave me and my parents a personal tour while his wife
Randy Gaugler’s and Koppenhöfer’s work in biological control using entomopathogenic nematodes that kill grubs.

Within the turfgrass management and breeding programs, there is interaction with the pest management group coordinated by Clarke in pathology, Koppenhöfer in entomology and Hart in weed science, and efforts by Huang and Tom Gianfagna, Ph.D., in turfgrass physiology, Murphy and Joe Heckman, Ph.D., in turfgrass management and fertility, and the breeding program under Meyer, Funk and Bonos.

The team of Murphy, Clarke, Brad Hillman, Ph.D., and biocontrol expert Don Kobayashi, Ph.D., also won the university’s Team Research Award when it devised an integrated program to control the summer patch disease problem.

**A nudge from sports**

Hurley believes he can recruit a number of high school and junior college students simply because of the full-fledged push in the field of sports turf management.

“Under Dr. Murphy’s direction, and because the sports turf industry has grown so much, Rutgers hired Brad Park, who has a master’s degree from Penn State,” Hurley says. “Brad is dedicated 100 percent to sports turf research and education here in the state of New Jersey. He and Dr. Murphy do all the sports turf work and helped establish the Sports Field Managers Association of New Jersey.”

Hurley’s own international contacts might also draw students. Giordano had dreamed for some time about working in Scotland. She recalls, “Dr. Hurley asked me what country I would like to work in and said he would get me an internship wherever I desired. I said, ‘Scotland,’ and before I knew it, I got the assignment to St. Andrews. And it was an amazing experience.”

The next internship for Giordano: Baltusrol Golf Club, the famous A.W. Tillinghast-designed course in Springfield, N.J.

**Generation to generation**

“One thing I think is very important about Rutgers,” Hurley says, “is that it was able to bridge the gap between generations (of professors). When one generation retires at a college, there is often uncertainty about whether these positions will be refilled. We had a strong program under the direction and leadership of Funk, Engel and Indyk. Since their retirements, not only has Rutgers successfully jumped to the next level, we have continued to improve without skipping a beat.”

“When you look closely at our research, teaching and extension programs, you understand how all the facets blend together,” says Clarke. “There are no walls. Essentially, we do whatever is needed as a team to get the job done.”

“We believe this latest effort to recruit the very best students will build upon the legacy of the Rutgers turfgrass program.”

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