Before Steve Swanson joined Temple University’s PhD program in tourism and sport, he asked faculty member Aubrey Kent where the new Sport Industry Research Center (SIRC) was housed.

Kent, who was transitioning to Temple from Florida State University to direct the center, tapped the side of his head. “In here,” he said.

In the three years since, Kent has built a powerhouse in sport management by assembling world-class faculty, developing a host of research partnerships and recruiting highly regarded PhD students, Swanson among them.

To accomplish that, Kent left Florida State, where he served as director and graduate coordinator of the sport management program for nearly a decade, and transplanted to Philadelphia—a place he and his family had never visited before his job interview.

Drawing by promises of the center’s initiation and expansion of the tourism PhD concentration to include sport, Kent came to Temple in Fall 2008 as past president of the North American Society for Sport Management.

He asked Jeremy Jordan, a respected scholar from the University of Maryland, to help build the center. A year later, SIRC hired sport marketing expert Joe Mahan from the University of Maryland and sport policy and finance researcher Emily Sparvero from the University of Texas at Austin.

“It only took some people to take the first step and for people to realize that Temple meant it when they wanted to build one of the best centers in the world,” Kent said. “They weren’t just talking.”

In Fall 2010, Joris Drayer, whose expertise includes ticket markets and fantasy sports, joined SIRC from the University of Memphis. In January 2011, Dan Funk, an internationally renowned scholar in consumer behavior, punctuated the aggressive hiring campaign by joining SIRC as a full professor from Griffith University in Australia.

In August, SIRC will welcome Brianna Clark from Clemson and Joel Macey, sport management program coordinator at the University of Georgia.

“With a reinvigorated focus on research, rapid growth in the form of faculty hiring and a backing to make it work, Temple has entered the discussion of the top programs in sport management,” Drayer said. “That’s impressive.”

A community resource

The faculty hires have created a breadth of experience and expertise within SIRC. More importantly, Kent said, each new member contributes to a shared vision of conducting real-world research that helps industry partners operate more efficiently.

Led by Kent’s and Jordan’s established connections and their intense outreach upon arriving in Philadelphia, SIRC has quickly established partnerships with a host of industry clients. They range from the NFL and the PGA TOUR to NASCAR, the Philadelphia Marathon and US Road Sports & Entertainment Group.

Other partners include Arthur Ashe Youth Tennis and Education, Back on My Feet, Cadence Cycling & Multisport Centers, the StarFinder Foundation for youth soccer and Zhang Salt Martial Arts, among others.

“With Aubrey and Jeremy, they’ve done a good job of building this center and doing what they needed to do to get it known locally, and that’s because they’re out there all the time,” said Elizabeth Barber, associate dean of the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, where SIRC is based.

“Our message is getting out impressively quickly.”

For community-based nonprofits that use sport as a catalyst for youth and community development, research and assessment may take a backseat to day-to-day operations because, in many cases, they are underfunded for the missions they pursue. SIRC attempts to change that through event and participant analyses, economic impact studies and other research that can be implemented to improve results.

“We really try to be a resource for the community as opposed to taking resources from the community to work on projects they could do themselves,” Kent said. “We’re trying to show them how our work can help them do their work better. And, overall, that was always the goal of the center, aligning with Temple’s philosophy of being a good community partner.”

There are few cities in the country more passionate about sports than Philadelphia. Jim Wesse, dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Western Ontario and a former professor of Kent’s, said many students “are keenly interested in the elite levels of sport, but really, the action is at the grassroots level.”

“So to have a hometown university that’s doing great work in this area [of nonprofits] is a marriage made in heaven,” he said.

For Sparvero, Temple was attractive because of the variety of sports and sport events in Philadelphia, which she said serves as a natural laboratory for research.

“The SIRC faculty have different areas of expertise and interest, but fundamentally we all acknowledge and respect the important relationship between sport organizations and their communities,” she said. “This allows us to use our research capacity to engage with these organizations in a meaningful way.”

Bridging research and practice

With increasing notoriety in academic and industry circles, applications for faculty positions at SIRC have increased in quantity and quality, and the PhD program’s process has become more and more competitive. In Fall 2010, SIRC welcomed three PhD students to bring its total to five, and Kent expects to add two to three more each year.

Richard Irwin, a professor in the Department of Health and Sport Sciences at the University of Memphis, said Kent’s notoriety as a scholar and his success as a doctoral adviser will continue to attract top candidates. Irwin, for one, recommends Temple to his master’s students pursuing their PhDs because of the university’s urban location and caliber of faculty.

“I’m always impressed when someone’s got a pretty ambitious agenda and then goes about accomplishing it,” Irwin said. “A lot of people talk, but not a lot of people—or organizations—follow up.”

Sparvero, the second PhD student to join the program, jokes that visitors entering the SIRC suite a few years ago would trip the motion-detecting lights, which had turned off due to lack of movement inside the office. Now, the place is abuzz and space is at a premium.

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Sparvero, a former athletic director at a junior college in his native Iowa, held coaching positions in the British Basketball League for five years, including three as head coach of the Glasgow Rocks in Scotland.

After three years as associate head basketball coach at Idaho State, he explored every sport management PhD program in the country. The No. 1 reason he chose Temple: the faculty. At the time Sparvero was applying, he saw hiring freezes or discontinued positions at universities across the country—but Temple was hiring.

“That was a signal of strength that they were committed to it and that they had the financial backing to make it successful,” said Sparvero, who entered the program in August 2009.

Another selling point was a unique partnership in which Temple’s Fox School of Business and the School of Tourism offer a PhD program in business administration concentrat ing in tourism and sport. Exposure to business and tourism courses and research faculty, Sparvero said, produces well-rounded graduates.

Mahan also said he was attracted to the School of Tourism because of the PhD program’s connection to the business school, as well as the SIRC itself.

“The potential of joining a program that had established a center specifically designed to bridge academic research and industry practice was a huge draw for me,” he said. “SIRC provides a solid foundation for scholarly inquiry by serving as a nexus between a variety of faculty experts in sport and recreation.”

The core SIRC faculty members are complemented by three additional School of Tourism faculty in sport and recreation—Michael Jackson, Debra Blatt and Rick Roll.

“We’re trying to help professional entities put on more enjoyable events or we’re hoping for cities and sponsors to get a better return on their investment,” Kent said when asked to describe the SIRC’s mission. “We’re trying to help communities use sport participation to improve the health and mental well-being of traditionally underserved persons in their communities.

“We’re trying to not be what might be perceived as the exploitation side of sport,” he continued. “We’re not trying to grab headlines or sell tickets. We’re trying to help promote the positive outcomes of what sport has to offer.”

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