

**ANNUAL REPORT TO THE
MICHIGAN TURFGRASS CONFERENCE**

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The primary focus of this presentation today is to discuss the positioning of MSU's two-year program in Lawn Care/Athletic Turf Management (LCAT) as established by the LCAT Marketing Plan. A year ago at this conference, Dr. Paul Rieke sought advice concerning the program's future from Mr. Walter Wilkie whose funding initiated the LCAT program in 1988. Subsequently, Program Coordinator David Gilstrap met with Mr. Wilkie, and they agreed that a more business-like approach was necessary in order for this program to succeed. They both agreed that modern marketing methods were in order, and that meant formulating and implementing a marketing plan. To the College of Business, Gilstrap advertised an opening for a summer intern, and in turn hired Mr. Ken Cherven. Cherven's marketing work laid a foundation for the program's future, which are formally detailed in the LCAT Marketing Plan that he put forth this past fall.

A significant portion of that document is devoted to a situational analysis of the competition and LCAT. We see the competitive segment for potential students as being four-year educational institutions, community colleges, and full-time employment. From the potential student's point-of-view, here are the advantages and disadvantages of each group.

First of all, four-year universities, including MSU, are the traditional facilitator offering broad academics leading to a baccalaureate degree, and beyond. The prestigious and well-funded institutions have long histories of providing the educational and experiential ingredients necessary for successful careers. Weaknesses include the length of time necessary to complete these requirements, which is now often more than four years, and the fact that such completion leads less and less to the jobs that the graduates thought would be awaiting them.

Community colleges are increasingly fulfilling many people's educational needs; they are attractive in many ways. Students have more options and often greater lee-way, depending on the school, or schools, that they attend. They can get an associate degree in as little time as two years and then go on for the next one. The costs are much less, often one-third that of MSU; as compared to LCAT, this is their greatest advantage. They are convenient both in terms of geographical proximity as well as the times that they schedule their classes. These factors enable many students to maintain full, or part-time jobs that generally pay better than those in university surroundings. Finally, even when working, students perceive that community-college work requires less effort and time commitment when compared to other institutions. On the negative side, community colleges most often lack two distinguishing attributes—tradition and prestige.

The third major competitor for potential students is full-time employment. This option offers immediate income that may be the first appreciable, disposable funds that they've ever had. This is probably accompanied by increased self-esteem. On the down-side, these jobs are likely to be few and low-paying with little opportunity for further advancement without further education. The harsh reality is that many jobs will be closed off to the high-school graduate who enters the job market at this point.

LCAT, like its competition, has inherent strengths and weaknesses, as well. The strengths include MSU's reputation within the turfgrass industry, the specialized focus of the program, its flexible scheduling

options, the quality of the instructional faculty, and the strong job-placement rates. The weaknesses are a general lack of program-specific recognition, a fledgling, poorly established alumni network, and a past inability to coordinate with companies in the turfgrass industry. To the prospective student, the biggest drawback is probably the high costs of tuition and on-campus living.

LCAT must promote itself to the right groups of people. The Marketing Plan identifies the following target-market segments: school counselors, business people, associations and municipalities, agriscience teachers, parents, and the students themselves. Since the over 700 Michigan high school guidance counselors have the most potential for immediate impact on LCAT number, they received the first LCAT mailings. They have also been hosted twice by MSU's Institute of Agricultural Technology at on-campus conferences, and another is planned for this spring. The rest of the target segments will be attacked in their order of listing. Therefore, you the industry people should expect at least one mailer before we meet again next January.

The Fall 94 recruiting class numbered 12, giving a total on-campus count of 22. The majority of these (12 of 22) originally applied to the Golf Turf Management Program (GTM) but did not gain acceptance. In the past, some students were able to transfer from LCAT to GTM by their second year. Both the GTM and LCAT Coordinators discourage this, and none have switched during the two years that Gilstrap has been on board. It appears that once in the LCAT program, the students realize the plethora of career opportunities that are accessible through a more general turfgrass-management emphasis. Age-wise, three-quarters of the LCAT students are in their 20's; the oldest is 64. Scholastically, they achieved a weighted grade point average of 3.2 per student.

If each year's recruiting class numbers four more than the previous one and five or less students quit or drop out annually, then LCAT will have at least 40 students in the program by 1999, which is Gilstrap's goal. Figure one shows the program's on-campus fall enrollment by class for the past year, this year, and next four years.

Gilstrap knows that he made the right choice in accepting this challenging position. He appreciates the support of his students, his associates, and his superiors. He has coined a saying that he repeats to almost everyone he meets, "There is no better place to be than in turf, and there is no better place to be in turf than MSU!"

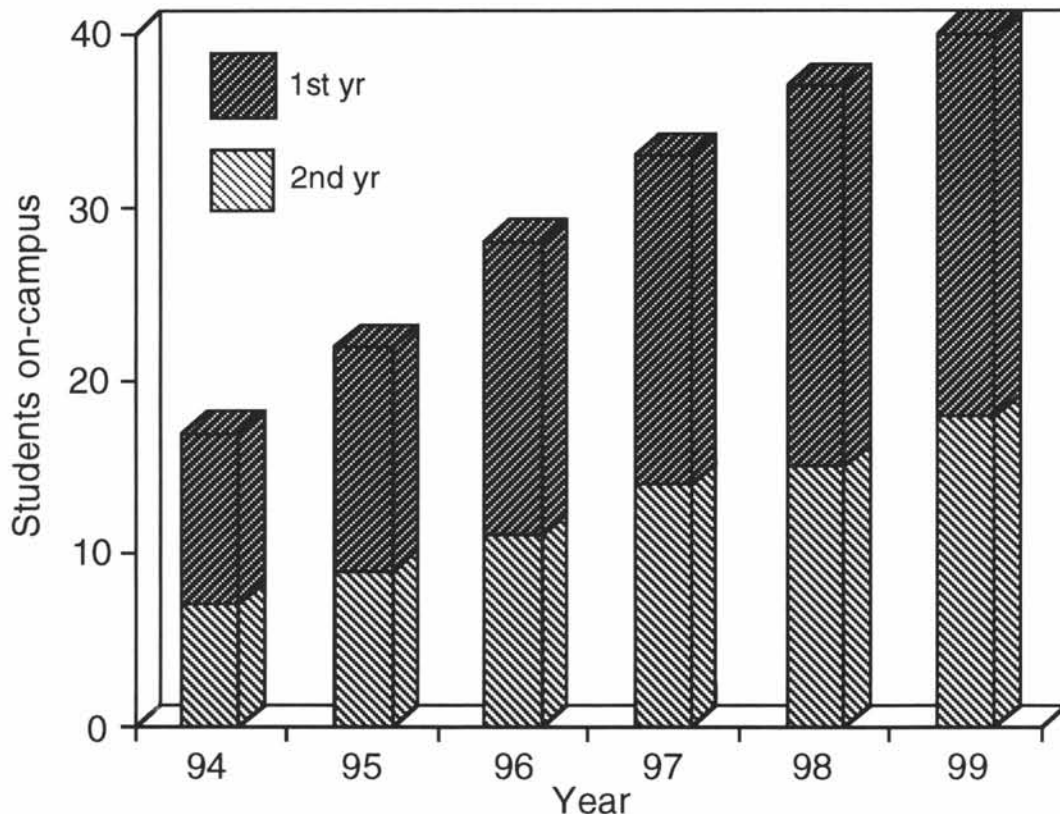


Figure 1. Past, current, and projected LCAT student numbers on-campus during Fall semester based on implementation of the LCAT Marketing Plan.