SIASCONSET — Hut inspection at Sankaty Head Caddie Camp began at 8 o’clock sharp on a bright midsummer morning. “Hats off!” barked assistant camp director Nick Riccardella as he walked through the rows of double-decked bunk beds, taking note of unswept floors and other infractions. At 8:15, a flag-raising ceremony was held in the courtyard outside.

By 8:30 a.m., most of the 54 campers were either on caddie duty at the nearby golf club or tending to chores elsewhere on the rustic campus, tucked between the 11th and 13th fairways of the Sankaty Head Golf Club on eastern Nantucket.

Not so, though, for a dozen campers who are high school juniors. They were attending a college counseling session in the camp library, learning about “reach” schools and “likelies,” engineering-major options versus liberal arts strongholds. Later that afternoon, a group of seniors would receive help with their college application essays.

At a camp founded in 1930 and long known for instructing teenage boys, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, in how to judge a putt, carry a golf bag, locate an errant tee shot, rake a bunker, and impress club members with their smarts and maturity, these training sessions are both new and necessary, according to those in charge of the facility.

“This is not your grandfather’s caddie camp anymore, many say, a statement that might strike several campers as literally true, their own grandfathers being proud camp alumni. “We’re the last of a kind and, we hope, also the first of a kind,” said Sankaty Head club member and camp foundation trustee Richard Drucker in the clubhouse that afternoon.

“It’s beyond these kids making money and finding jobs. . . . We’re preparing them better for college life and beyond.”
Already regarded as the last private-club caddie camp in the country, if not the world, the camp’s mission was reconceived two years ago. Camp trustees hired Dave Hinman, a veteran high school teacher and coach, to implement their plan. Hinman in turn has made several key changes in the program, placing greater emphasis — and scrutiny — on campers’ classroom performance during the school year while striving to build a more diverse camp community to share in the 10-week summer experience. These changes include expanding the pool of applicants via an aggressive, Web-based outreach effort; partnering with organizations such as First Tee, which provides golf instruction and educational resources to inner-city youths; adding courses in college counseling, SAT test prep, and public speaking; and bringing in motivational speakers like New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick, a Sankaty club member. Of this year’s group, 25 hail from Massachusetts; the rest come from 15 other states, including Ohio, South Carolina, California, and Oregon. Hinman received 100 applicants for the 17 slots available this year. Ideally, he says, campers spend three to five summers here, beginning at age 13 or 14. As they advance in seniority, they gain more authority over which golfers they’re assigned to help. The hope is they’ll form lasting bonds with specific members as well as staffers and fellow campers, bonds that often serve them well in young adulthood and beyond. “The younger they are, the more opportunity they have to grow here,” Hinman said during a tour of the camp facility, which includes three dormitories plus separate buildings housing a dining hall, rec room, library, laundry, and shower area.
Jack Eichen (left) and other caddies man the bags during a recent round of golf at Sankaty Head Golf Club.

Campers also now have Wi-Fi coverage and other technological resources unavailable to them just a few years ago. Other traditions and rules at the all-boys’ camp — no drugs or alcohol, no social visits with the opposite sex — have been carefully preserved, however. “It’s beyond these kids making money and finding jobs, as was the case for decades,” Drucker noted. “We’re preparing them better for college life and beyond.”

Like the camp, Sankaty Head Golf Club boasts a storied lineage, its link-style course still considered among the finest of its vintage in the world. The waiting list to join is long, the membership roll a reflection of Nantucket’s well-heeled, if rather eclectic, summer population.

Without the solid support of club members, says Hinman, the camp might no longer exist at all, a fate shared by many private-club camps that vanished from New England’s golfing landscape in the 1960s and ’70s: victims of rising operating costs and liability concerns, among other factors.

Affirming their commitment, members rushed to help rebuild the camp after a fire in August 2011 gutted the mess hall and one dorm. Camp continued more or less normally for the remainder of the summer, and the buildings were replaced during the off-season. “You need a lot of people to buy into the idea,” Hinman said “And here you have a [club] membership that has a strong relationship with these kids and wants to keep it going.”

Make no mistake, though. The money to be made is still meaningful, and plentiful, to campers as young as 13, some of whom arrive with little or no exposure to golf whatsoever.

This year’s group can expect to earn $3,000 to $15,000 apiece in caddie fees and tips, working six days a week (weather permitting). Campers with two years’ service or more can apply for additional scholarship aid, which is awarded at summer’s end by a panel of trustees that includes former General Electric CEO Jack Welch and ex-Honeywell chief Larry Bossidy (some have likened these interview sessions to episodes of “Shark Tank Nantucket”), both longtime golf club members. More than $100,000 is handed out each year, a sum trustees say they hope to boost substantially in the near future.

Zack Wittman for The Boston Globe

Assistant camp director Nick Riccardella performs a bunk-check at Sankaty Head Caddie Camp.

Most of what the campers earn is pure profit, too. Charged a $5 daily fee for room and board, they pay only a token amount to support the camp, whose annual budget is approximately $400,000. In return comes the privilege of summering on Nantucket, making lifelong friends and networking contacts, and, yes, getting to golf on a world-class course in its off-hours.

“We’re trying to send as many through college with as little debt as possible,” explained camp foundation head Jacques Wullschleger, who along with Hinman has been instrumental in tweaking the camp’s mission and focus.

In many ways, camper Kareem Brown and staff member Ryan Collopy embody what the Caddie Camp experience was originally designed to do, decades ago.
Brown, 15, a high-school sophomore from Trenton, N.J., had never set foot on Nantucket before — or on a golf course, for that matter — when he arrived at Caddie Camp in June. He applied online after hearing about the camp through one of his father’s co-workers. His first few days were “really tiring and stressful,” Brown admitted during a break from an intramural softball game. “When people call rank on you, it’s not the best feeling.” He also had difficulty mastering what to do, and not to do, when golfers were gathered on the putting green, he said.

Zack Wittman for The Boston Globe
Campers gather for the morning flag-raising ceremony at Sankaty Head Caddie Camp. However, Brown added, he’s since learned to love the camp experience, its camaraderie and teamwork, and hopes to return next summer.
Hinman says Brown’s adjustment has been fun to witness, on many levels. After his first few days as a caddie, Hinman recalled, a club member phoned to complain — politely but pointedly — that Brown seemed lost trying to follow a struck golf ball. What could be done about this, the club member asked. Hinman took Brown to the golf club’s practice tee and had him watch a few shots, describing what he saw. No luck. So Hinman arranged for an eye exam. Problem solved.
Collopy, 19, of North Andover is in his seventh year at camp. For the past two, he’s served as a senior staff member, running extracurricular activities and mentoring younger campers. Headed to Vermont’s St. Michael’s College in the fall, where he plans to study business, he first came to camp as a 13-year old in need of mentoring himself. “At first there was more of a fun, summer-camp aspect to it,” Collopy recalled. Making money was important, too, he said. Equally valuable, though, have been the relationships he’s forged with club members and their guests.
“You make strong connections here,” he said. Seated next to him in the camp mess hall was Bryan Garland, a 21-year-old senior at The College of New Jersey. Garland said he switched his major from engineering to finance — and landed a plum internship at Merrill Lynch — on the advice of a club member for whom he’d caddied over several summers.

By next summer, according to Hinman, the camp will be offering courses in being interviewed for college or employment. “There’s still some tweaking to be done,” he acknowledged. “We really want to keep camp traditions alive, though. They’re too valuable to lose.”