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I'm Taking my Talents to...An Examination of Hometown Socio-Economic Status on the College-Choice Factors of Football Student-Athletes at a Southeastern University

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Collegiate athletic department personnel must be aware of student-athletes' college-choice factors so they can recruit and retain athletes that enhance the brands of their sport programs, athletic department, and institution (Mixon, Trevino, & Minto, 2004). The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the college-choice factors of current NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football players at a southeastern university (n = 73) while focusing on segmentation by median annual household income. Using a modified version of the Student-Athlete College-Choice Profile (Gabert, Hale, & Montalvo, 1999), the research utilized theories of brand equity, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and human capital to guide the discussion of attracting student-athletes who are a perceived fit for their program (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Dumond, Lynch, & Platania, 2008; Kotler, 2004). An analysis of the results illustrated that the list of the most influential college-choice factors varied depending on respondents' median annual household income; however, a combination of academically-related and athletically-related college-choice factors were rated in the top ten regardless of median annual household income. Therefore, it is vital that collegiate athletic personnel use these results to enhance efficiency in the recruiting process and engage in CSR to holistically develop college athletes.

Introduction

Each year high school students from across the United States make crucial decisions about the future direction of their lives. Students may choose to apply for a job, join a branch of the military service, or enroll in a post-secondary institution of higher education. Students who seek to enroll in a college or university are faced with additional choices regarding which institution(s) to apply to for admission consideration. Each aspiring collegiate student considers a variety of factors during the college-selection process, but prospective collegiate student-athletes are presented with a unique variety of college-choice factors that influence which institution(s) they choose to apply to and subsequently enroll if accepted (Adler & Adler, 1991; Konnert & Giese, 1987; Reynaud, 1998).

Varsity student-athletes comprise a segment of the student body that supplies an inimitable and valuable service for their respective institution (Mixon, Trevino, & Minto, 2004; Toma & Cross, 1998). In particular, researchers have explained that the positive perception of an athletic department is instrumental to the overall enhancement of the academic institution for prospective students (Canale, Dunlap, Britt, & Donahue, 1996; Davis & Van Dusen, 1975). As a result, collegiate athletic administrators should be committed to attracting and retaining student-athletes who will enhance the brands of their sport program, athletic department, and institution.

Collegiate athletics, particularly revenue sports such as football and men's basketball, garner visibility as the metaphorical front porch of the university. For example, this implies that although the athletic department may not be the most important department within a university, it often catches the attention of the public and plays a role in shaping the first impression perceptions of a university (Fisher, 2009). Colleges and sports teams that are highly visible in the national media, particularly institutions that are members of the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), are exceptionally susceptible to the competing dualism of academic integrity and athletic winning (Toma & Cross, 1998). Recognizing that the public's perception of the university's brand is subject to bias based on athletic success, athletic departments can be victims of a potential identity crisis regarding their primary role in an institution of higher education. Consequently, it is beneficial for collegiate athletic administrators to embrace corporate social responsibility (CSR) in order to develop the brand equity of their individual sport programs and athletic department, valuing their role as an extension of the brand of their respective university (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Lawlor, 1998).

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The majority of football student-athletes competing in FBS institutions are minorities who come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Lapchick, 2011; Zimbalist, 1999). Consequently, collegiate athletic administrators must be prepared to effectively utilize CSR to address the issues inherent in recruiting and enrolling a group of underprivileged young adults who step foot on a university's campus whose demographic consists primarily of a wealthy, white demographic (Cunningham, 2007). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the differences between the most influential college-choice factors of football student-athletes when focusing on differences in the median annual household income of their hometown environment. The research will utilize the theories of CSR, brand equity, and lifetime human capital to guide the discussion.

The results of this study are beneficial for multiple athletic department stakeholders, specifically athletic administrators and football coaches, support staff, and student-athletes. It is vital that collegiate athletic administrators are aware of student-athletes' college-choice factors so administrators can better serve their student-athletes, athletic department, and institution (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Moreover, administrators and coaches must have an understanding of the college-choice factors so they can attract and retain student-athletes who will enhance the brand equity of the program, athletic department, and academic institution. Likewise, prospective student-athletes need to be encouraged to be attentive to which college can best help them develop their academic, athletic, and personal lives, and subsequently their lifetime human capital (Dumond, Lynch, & Platania, 2008; Kotler, 2004). Therefore, in an effort to educate collegiate administrators and coaches regarding the need to apply CSR, this study aimed to examine the most influential college-choice factors of FBS football student-athletes when focusing on differences in the median annual household income of their hometown.

Research Questions

Based on a review of the related literature, the following research questions were created to guide the research:

[RQ 1] During the college-selection process, what were the most influential college-choice factors of NCAA Division I FBS football players at a southeastern university who were offered and signed an athletic grant-in-aid (as defined and permitted by the NCAA) prior to attending the university?

[RQ 2] During the college-selection process, what were the [2A, 2B] when focusing on the hometown median annual household income of NCAA Division I FBS football players' at a southeastern university who were offered and signed an athletic grant-in-aid (as defined and permitted by the NCAA) prior to attending the university?

[2A] most influential college-choice factors

[2B] differences between the most influential college-choice factors

Theoretical Framework

Corporate Social Responsibility

Many terms and definitions of corporate social responsibility have emerged over the past few decades. For example, the Watts and Holme (1999) defined CSR as “the continuing commitment by business to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the community and society at large” (p. 3). Also, according to Bradish and Cronin (2009), “the CSR mindset and practice is grounded in giving back to one’s community, providing goodwill to others, and effectively bringing about change to important social causes while maintaining sound business strategies” (p. 696). Moreover, CSR can be broadly described as being morally responsible and accountable for its stakeholders and society (Carroll, 1979, 1999; DeSensi & Rosenberg, 2010). Since CSR “incorporates both social and economic interests” of an organization (Bradish & Cronin, 2009, p. 692), intercollegiate athletic administrators have a responsibility to serve their stakeholders,

which include the student-athletes, athletic administrators, alumni, fans, donors, sponsors, media, faculty, and staff. Furthermore, intercollegiate athletic administrators have a social responsibility to holistically develop their student-athletes and meet the expectations promised to them by their coaching staff, athletic department, and university.

Sport has been described as a social institution. For example, sport managers in virtually every functional area of the sport industry are exposed to social issues that mirror society as a whole (Coakley, 2009). Consequently, it is inevitable that sport managers will be forced to address social and ethical issues inherent with being surrounded by diverse populations, such as dilemmas revolving around gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, politics, social class, discrimination, and persons with disabilities. Therefore, it is critical that sport managers invest time and energy into CSR ideals that will guide their decision-making processes (DeSensi & Rosenberg, 2010). Thus, in the spirit of CSR, collegiate athletic administrators have an obligation to genuinely meet the needs, preferences, and expectations of student-athletes while simultaneously operating a multi-million dollar budget (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006; Godfrey, 2005; Mackey, Mackey, & Bamey, 2007).

Due to the fact that the financial ramifications are particularly exorbitant at the most competitive level of intercollegiate athletics (i.e., NCAA's FBS), CSR is necessitated by sport managers (Restoring the balance, 2010). For example, university and athletic administrators are criticized for compromising their educational mission by succumbing to the interests of external stakeholders in exchange for financial support and ultimately catering to the pursuit of a "successful" athletic department, primarily defined by athletic performance, such as a favorable win/loss record and/or placing high in the postseason rankings (Lapchick & Slaughter, 1989; Miller, 1995; Rooney, 1998; Sperber, 1990). Furthermore, Branch (2011) wrote "the least educated [i.e., student-athletes from low socio-economic backgrounds] are the most exploited" (p. 104). As a result, it is critically important for collegiate athletic departments to operate under the umbrella of CSR or else they risk failing to embrace the opportunity to make sound moral and ethical decisions that benefit individuals and society as a whole.

The four responsibilities. Carroll (1979) proposed one of the first models of CSR that can directly be applied to sport managers. Although Carroll acknowledged that profitability is a driving force behind CSR (Whetten, Rands, & Godfrey, 2001), he identified four fundamental responsibilities of CSR: economic, legal, ethical, discretionary (Carroll, 1979). Therefore, when decisions are being made, sport managers have non-economic responsibilities, primarily legal, ethical, and moral duties, to their stakeholders and society (Godfrey, 2009). For example, college athletes are subject to exploitation because of the perceived lack of due process in the current NCAA system (Branch, 2011). When a student-athlete is accused of breaking an NCAA rule, the school takes a stance to defend itself in light of the accusations, and the young student-athlete is often left alone since there is currently no adequate support system in place to advocate for his best interest. Furthermore, the NCAA has set the precedence that student-athletes who are accused of infractions are guilty until proven innocent (Branch, 2011). This model of intercollegiate athletics is criticized as perpetuating social injustice since a student-athlete may become alienated once he or she is a liability to the university.

Stakeholder theory. As previously alluded to, there are multiple stakeholders in intercollegiate athletics. Freeman (1984) was the pioneer of acknowledging that specific groups of people could affect the course of an organization, and he termed these groups stakeholders. Furthermore, managers that alienated a group of stakeholders, either economically or morally,

were less likely to meet their goals (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Thus, stakeholders, and the preferences of stakeholders, are a central element under the umbrella of CSR.

Corporate social performance and corporate citizenship. Wood (1991) offered a supplemental model to CSR, namely that of corporate social performance (CSP). According to Wood's CSP, organizations are judged not only on their philosophies of CSR, but also on their responsiveness to issues involving stakeholders over a period of time. Researchers Waddock (2008) and Wood and Logsdon (2002) added to CSP by focusing on a term they coined as corporate citizenship. With corporate citizenship, managers are expected to begin to bridge the gap between ethical and economic decision-making regarding the interests of stakeholders (Godfrey, 2009). Ultimately, it is argued that corporate citizenship and CSR create a form of strategic philanthropy that "builds long term loyalty, legitimacy, trust, and brand equity that reinforces the corporation's other strategic objectives" (Godfrey, 2009, p. 706).

Brand Equity

Brand equity, characterized as the set of beliefs that consumers hold about a particular object (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010), is dependent upon the perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, and brand loyalty that consumers have towards the product (Aaker, 1991; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998). In regards to this study, the "product" can be operationally defined as the sport program. While there are several critical areas in developing brand equity, scholars have emphasized the unique nature of college athletics when explaining that employees (e.g., collegiate athletic administrators, coaches, and student-athletes) are an important element to consider when building brand equity (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Specifically, Harris and de Chernatony (2001) stated that "[employees] need to be recognized as a brand's ambassadors'... and can have a powerful impact on consumers' perceptions of both the brand and the organization" (p. 441). Further, researchers have illustrated that employees' behaviors can either reinforce a brand's advertised values or, if inconsistent with these values, undermine the credibility of advertised messages (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Thus, with the high profile nature of men's football, it is important that coaches understand their student-athletes' college-choice factors and adopt a CSR perspective in order to effectively build their brand equity.

Lifetime Human Capital

CSR is most effective when coaches and administrators are able to identify the wants and needs of their student-athletes so they can meet the individuals' expectations and ultimately produce contributing citizens of society (Kotler, 2004). Thus, it makes sense that the lifetime human capital framework would be used when examining prospective student-athletes' preferences (i.e., college-choice factors) when choosing a university. Dumond et al. (2008) explained the following in regard to this theoretical framework: "When recruits select a college, they do so to maximize their expected discounted lifetime utility with respect to that choice. [It is assumed] that recruits evaluate the discounted accrued benefits of attending each school against the discounted accrued costs" (p. 71). To that end, a student-athlete compares the benefits with the costs of attending a particular university. Next, the student-athlete selects the institution with the greatest net benefits according to his or her preferences. The authors expanded on this process when stating the following:

The benefits of attending college are assumed to be an improvement in human capital that would increase the productivity [or marketability] of the recruit in the labor market. This improvement in human capital may differ from one school to another, and [it is assumed] that any such differences are related to the academic reputation of the university (Dumond et al., 2008, p. 71).

Collegiate athletic administrators who engage in CSR are more likely to effectively meet student-athletes' needs and expectations, thus adding value to student-athletes' lifetime human capital. Thus, the university personnel (e.g., collegiate administrators, coaches, support staff) who add the most perceived value to prospective student-athletes' lifetime human capital are most likely to attract and enroll the recruit. Although the theories will assist in guiding the discussion of the results, it is also important to examine previous investigations into college-choice factors to gain a better overview of the topic before discussing the methodology used in this study.

College-Choice Factors of Student-Athletes

In a study focusing on college-choice factors, Mathes and Gurney (1985) found that student-athletes rated the academic environment and college coach as more important factors than the athletic environment in their college-selection process. Six years later, Adler and Adler (1991) continued to find that the most frequent reason that student-athletes chose their institution depended on the reputation of the college coach. However, additional research has demonstrated that student-athletes are influenced by a variety of other athletic-based factors. For example, Konnert and Giese (1987) suggested that the perception of playing early in their careers was an influential factor, and results from Reynaud (1998) suggested that student-athletes also base their decision on the athletic scholarship offered during the recruiting process. Further, Hodges and Barbuto (2002) confirmed that facilities and campus visits were critical factors for high school students when selecting which college to attend.

Building on the previous research, Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, and Palmer (2003) highlighted the fact that there are several other notable athletic-based factors that student-athletes consider when making their decision on what institution to attend: television exposure, the opportunity to play earlier, facilitated route to the professional ranks, and/or playing in front of large crowds. However, Letawsky et al. (2003) stressed the fact that "the most important factor for student-athletes was the degree program options offered by the university" (p. 608). Thus, multiple studies have drawn different conclusions about the most important factors that student-athletes considered when selecting a university to attend.

Ultimately, all internal stakeholders of a university (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) contribute to the brand equity of the university whether they acknowledge it or not. Therefore, understanding the preferences of these stakeholders, particularly student-athletes as presented in this article, will help attract and retain those individuals that are a mutual fit for the institution (Bolman & Deal, 2008). In essence, if coaches are cognizant of CSR as it pertains to the brand equity of their team, then they are afforded the opportunity to financially sustain their sport as well as attract, retain, and produce student-athletes who will ultimately be contributing citizens of society at large.

Methodology

Instrumentation

A modified version of the Student-Athlete College-Choice Profile (SACCP) questionnaire, originally developed by Gabert, Hale, and Montalvo (1999), was utilized to collect data for this study. The original SACCP was constructed based on research from previous college-choice research (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Kallio, 1995) as well as feedback from surveying athletic department personnel at various universities (Gabert et al., 1999). Furthermore, Gabert et al. (1999) reported that “a Cronbach alpha was run on all of the variables that produced an overall internal consistency reliability score of 0.84” (p. 23). For the purposes of this study, the researchers modified the SACCP to add additional factors specific to football that were not included in the original instrument. Similar to the development of the SACCP (Gabert et al., 1999), the items added were indicative of the results from surveying collegiate athletic administration and sport administration faculty members regarding potential college-choice factors of student-athletes. Once the items were added, a pilot test was conducted with a mixture of current and former student-athletes to test the modified SACCP. After feedback and suggestions were implemented following the first pilot test, a second pilot test was conducted with a new mixture of current and former student-athletes. Participants from the second pilot test offered no recommendations for change. An internal consistency reliability measure was not calculated due to the nature of the survey questions. For example, since each item measured an isolated degree of influence, it is not logical to test the internal consistency reliability across items that essentially measure different dependent variables (i.e., college-choice factors). Consequently, the researchers concluded that the modified SACCP was an acceptable instrument to use.

Student-athletes completing the survey were asked to recall the recruiting process and retroactively rate how influential the list of 61 college-choice factors were during their collection-selection process. Subjects were asked to rate each of these individual college-choice factors using a four-point semantic differential Likert-type scale, which included 0 (*Not Influential/NONE*), 1 (*Slightly Influential/LOW*), 2 (*Moderately Influential/MEDIUM*), and 3 (*Extremely Influential/HIGH*), to describe the degree of influence that each college-choice factor had on their selection of which institution to attend. Respondents also had the option to respond *Not Applicable* and/or skip any question(s). A semantic differential Likert-type scale was chosen because it represented an ordinal scale, at minimum, and an approximate interval scale (Labovitz, 1970). Furthermore, the researchers who developed the original SACCP instrument treated the data as interval level measurement (Gabert et al., 1999). Following the list of college-choice factors, there were a series of questions that helped the researchers build a demographic profile of participants.

Sample

The population for this study included NCAA Division I FBS football players at a southeastern university who were offered and signed an athletic grant-in-aid agreement prior to attending the university and provided their hometown zip code information ($n = 73$). A total of 84 football student-athletes were eligible to participate in the study, but only 73 players voluntarily responded, which yielded an overall return rate of 86.9%. Based on the response rate,

it is assumed that the responses were a representative sample of all NCAA Division I FBS football players who offered and signed an athletic grant-in-aid agreement prior to attending the southeastern university, but not meant to be generalizable to all FBS football players.

Procedures and Data Collection

The data-collection period began on the first day of practice for the 2010 football season and concluded after the last regular-season football game of the 2010 season. Attempts were made to survey the target population by approaching and inviting potential subjects when multiple members of the team were gathered (e.g., position meetings, meals, athletic training treatment sessions). Hard copy questionnaires were administered in-person to all subjects who voluntarily participated in the research. Specifically, implied consent was communicated within the directions of the instrument, and permission to survey members of the football team at the southeastern university was granted by joint cooperation with the Associate Athletic Director for Football Administration and the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

One question on the questionnaire requested participants' hometown zip code. Subsequently, the zip code information was utilized to collect the median annual household income for each specific zip code according to information from the 2010 United States Census (*United States Census Bureau, 2012*). The researchers chose to ask for hometown zip code instead of approximate household income prior to entering college because the researchers were concerned that responses to approximate household income would be inaccurately self-reported and/or skipped. Therefore, the data collected via the hometown zip code is intended to be representative of the hometown environment of the participant, not representative of the individual himself.

Statistical Analytical Methodology

The statistical analysis software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze responses. Descriptive statistics were employed to compute means, standard deviations, and frequency percentages for each college-choice factor. Next, the responses were divided into inter-tertile ranges (three equal groupings) based on median annual household income of participants' hometown. Dividing the sample into mutually exclusive and exhaustive inter-tertile ranges allowed the researchers to identify differences and trends based on individuals whose hometown median annual household income comprised the lowest third (i.e., the lowest median annual household incomes: \$22,204-\$34,707), middle third (i.e., the middle range of median annual household incomes: \$34,708-\$47,150), and highest third of the sample (i.e., the highest median annual household incomes: \$47,151-\$120,075). Finally, the college-choice factors were ranked in descending order by the mean value to indicate the most influential college-choice factors relative to each other for each particular segmented group. Additionally, the researchers provided the percentage of participants who responded *Extremely Influential* to supplement the mean scores of the top ten most influential college-choice factors for each segmented group.

Ultimately, the researchers concluded that there were not any statistical significance tests that were appropriate to utilize to test the research questions due to Type I error concerns, small sample size, and non-normality of responses due to a four-point Likert-type scale. Moreover, previous research that has used the same instrument has examined the college-choice factors

only by using descriptive statistics (Gabert et al., 1999; Jordan & Kobritz, 2011). Therefore, this study will extend upon methodology previously used by empirically observing differences between various rankings of college-choice factors. The findings are presented following a discussion of this study's limitations.

Limitations of the Study

There were some inherent limitations of this study. This research was exploratory in nature meaning since this study only surveyed football players who were offered an athletic grant-in-aid agreement at one university, it is not intended to be generalizable to all NCAA Division I FBS football players. Additionally, when this study was conducted, the directions instructed participants to recall and retroactively rate the degree of influence of each college-choice factor. However, this was a limitation since some of the participants were years removed from their college-selection process and their recall may not be as accurate due to the amount of time that passed, being socialized to their university, or a variety of other extraneous variables. Nonetheless, it is assumed that the participants responded to the questions honestly and accurately.

Results

When prescreening the data, the researchers produced a boxplot to get an overview of measures of central tendency in regards to the median annual household income data of the sample (median = \$38,575), variance (range = \$22,204, \$120,075), quartile ranges, and outliers in the sample. An interesting observation from the boxplot, as displayed in Figure 1, is that 50% of the participants came from a hometown whose median annual household income was between \$22,204 and \$38,575. Furthermore, 25% of participants came from a hometown whose median annual household income ranged between \$32,698 and \$38,575, a relatively small range compared to the other quartile ranges.

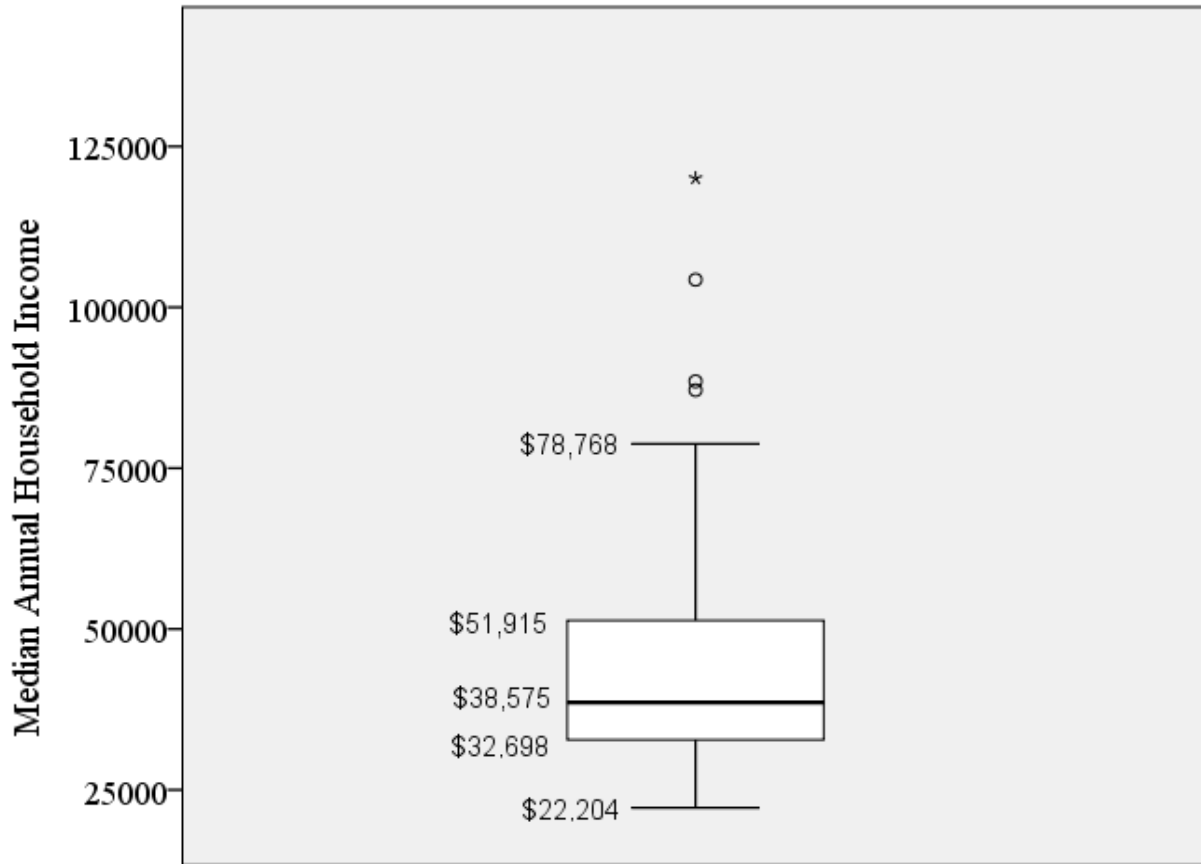


Figure 1. Boxplot of Median Annual Household Income for All Respondents

RQ 1: Most Influential College-Choice Factors – All Respondents

Descriptive statistics were employed to examine the most influential college-choice factors during the college-selection process of NCAA Division I FBS football players at a southeastern university who signed an athletic grant-in-aid agreement. A mean was calculated for each of the college-choice factors based on the responses from the entire sample. The top ten means were then sorted in descending order, as depicted in Table 1, to operationally reveal the most influential college-choice factors, relative to each other, of the participants.

Table 1
 Top 10 Most Influential College-Choice Factors of All Respondents (n = 73)

College-Choice Factor	M	SD	% Extremely Influential
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.61 (1)	0.71	70.4
Total academic value of the college’s degree	2.54 (2)	0.67	63.9
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.53 (3)	0.65	61.6
Reputation of the college head coach	2.52 (4)	0.73	64.8

Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.49 (5)	0.77	62.5
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.45 (6)	0.75	47.9
Academic reputation of the college	2.41 (7)	0.73	53.5
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.40 (8)	0.87	59.7
Playing in front of large crowds and/or a sold-out stadium	2.39 (9)	0.80	54.2
Opportunity to win a national championship	2.38 (10)	0.76	53.5

Note. The scale ranged from 0 (*Not Influential*) to 3 (*Extremely Influential*)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

The college-choice factor “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” reported the largest mean ($M = 2.61$; $SD = 0.67$) indicating that, overall, participants rated it the highest degree of influence. Three of the top ten most influential college-choice factors were academically-related while the remaining seven were athletically-related in nature.

RQ 2A: Most Influential College-Choice Factors – Segmented by Inter-Tertile Ranges of Hometown Median Annual Household Income

Descriptive statistics were employed to examine the most influential college-choice factors during the college-selection process when focusing on the median annual household income of respondents’ respective hometown. A mean was calculated for each of the college-choice factors based on the responses of each of the independent samples (i.e., lowest income inter-tertile range, middle income inter-tertile range, and highest income inter-tertile range). Inter-tertile ranges were chosen because there was not a natural break in the median annual household incomes from the sample and the researchers agreed that a summary of the results were able to be presented in a succinct manner. The means were then sorted in descending order, as depicted in Table 2, 3, and 4, to reveal the most influential college-choice factors respective to each inter-tertile range of median annual incomes.

When focusing on the responses from participants who came from a hometown represented in the lowest inter-tertile range (as demonstrated in Table 2), “Overall campus atmosphere and environment” was the most influential college-choice factor ($M = 2.65$; $SD = 0.71$). There were no natural breaks in the mean scores in which to draw attention for this segment. Also, only three of the top ten most influential college-choice factors were not athletically related for participants in the lowest inter-tertile range.

Table 2

Hometown Environments with Median Annual Household Incomes in the Lowest Inter-Tertile Range: \$22,204 - \$34,707 (n = 24)

College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% <i>Extremely Influential</i>
Overall campus atmosphere and environment	2.65 (1)	0.71	73.9
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.62 (2)	0.71	70.8
Academic reputation of the college	2.62 (2)	0.49	62.5

Total academic value of the college's degree	2.58 (4)	0.65	66.7
Reputation of the college head coach	2.54 (5)	0.66	62.5
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.50 (6)	0.66	58.3
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.46 (7)	0.59	50.0
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.43 (8)	0.95	65.2
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.42 (9)	0.78	54.2
Playing in front of large crowds and/or a sold-out stadium	2.42 (9)	0.78	54.2

Note. The scale ranged from 0 (*Not Influential*) to 3 (*Extremely Influential*)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

Table 3 illustrates the most influential college-choice factor of respondents whose hometown was represented in the middle inter-tertile range of median annual household income. The most influential college-choice factors of this segmented group were “Opportunity to win a conference championship” ($M = 2.76$; $SD = 0.52$) and “Opportunity to play in a bowl game” ($M = 2.71$; $SD = 0.62$). Empirical observations of the results exposed a natural break occurring between these top two college-choice factors and the other eight most influential college-choice factors. This finding suggested that these top two factors were considerably more influential, with approximately 80% of the respondents selecting *Extremely Influential* for each of these two college-choice factors.

Table 3

Hometown Environments with Median Annual Household Incomes in the Middle Inter-Tertile Range: \$34,707 - \$47,150 (n = 25)

College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% <i>Extremely Influential</i>
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.76 (1)	0.52	80.0
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.71 (2)	0.62	79.2
Reputation of the college head coach	2.61 (3)	0.66	69.6
Playing in front of large crowds and/or a sold-out stadium	2.58 (4)	0.58	62.5
Opportunity to win a national championship	2.58 (4)	0.65	66.7
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.56 (6)	0.77	68.0
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.56 (6)	0.58	60.0
TV and media exposure for the college, football team, and/or conference	2.52 (8)	0.65	60.0
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.50 (9)	0.83	66.7
Opportunity to finish in the top 25 in the polls (nationally ranked) every year	2.50 (9)	0.59	54.2
Total academic value of the college's degree	2.50 (9)	0.72	62.5

Note. The scale ranged from 0 (*Not Influential*) to 3 (*Extremely Influential*)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

A summary of the responses for participants whose hometown median annual household income fell in the highest inter-tertile range are displayed in Table 4. The most influential college-choice factor of the participants in the highest inter-tertile range was “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” ($M = 2.70$; $SD = 0.56$). Empirical observations of the results revealed a natural break occurring between the first and second most influential college-choice factors as well as between the second-ranked college-choice factor and the other eight. These observations are important to note because they add insight that “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” is clearly the most influential college-choice factor for football players who come from a hometown whose median annual household income is subsumed in the highest inter-tertile range (\$47,151-\$120,075). Although there is a natural break between the mean scores of the second and third most influential college-choice factors, it is important to note that the percentage of responses that were *Extremely Influential* is identical. Therefore, it is evident that more participants responded *Moderately Influential* to “Total academic value of the college’s degree” ($M = 2.54$; $SD = 0.66$) than “Reputation of the college head coach” ($M = 2.42$; $SD = 0.88$). An additional observation is that responses in the top ten of the highest inter-tertile range generally produced mean scores with the largest standard deviations, suggesting that this group varied substantially on the most influential college-choice factors.

Table 4

Hometown Environments with Median Annual Household Incomes in the Highest Inter-Tertile Range: \$47,150 - \$120,075 (n = 24)

College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% <i>Extremely Influential</i>
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.70 (1)	0.56	73.9
Total academic value of the college's degree	2.54 (2)	0.66	62.5
Reputation of the college head coach	2.42 (3)	0.88	62.5
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.38 (4)	0.77	54.2
Degree programs and academic courses offered	2.33 (5)	0.70	45.8
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.33 (5)	0.87	54.2
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.29 (7)	0.95	58.3
Academic reputation of the college	2.29 (7)	0.86	50.0
Quality of the football center’s facilities	2.25 (9)	0.90	45.8
Location of the college (town, city, and/or state)	2.25 (9)	0.85	45.8

Note. The scale ranged from 0 (*Not Influential*) to 3 (*Extremely Influential*)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

RQ 2B: Differences in the Most Influential College-Choice Factors – Segmented by Inter-Tertile Ranges of Hometown Median Annual Household Income

A complete summary of the most influential college-choice factors of this sample is succinctly reported in Table 5. Comparisons of mean scores across inter-tertile ranges are

displayed here. Empirical observation was utilized to examine differences in the most influential college-choice factors across inter-tertile ranges of hometown median annual household income. When analyzing these results, it is important to note differences in both raw mean scores as well as relative rankings of the most influential college-choice factors. At first glance, two stark differences are the rankings for the factors “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” and “Total academic value of the college’s degree” – participants in the middle inter-tertile range ranked those two factors tied for ninth while participants in the lowest and highest inter-tertile ranges ranked those factors no lower than fourth. Also, participants in the middle inter-tertile range ranked “Opportunity to win a conference championship” first (i.e., the most influential college-choice factor) with a raw mean score of 2.76, whereas participants comprising the lowest and highest inter-tertile ranges ranked it seventh and fourth, respectively, with raw mean scores and rankings of 2.46 and 2.38, respectively. This suggests that participants in the middle inter-tertile range were more influenced than their peers regarding the opportunity to win a conference championship. The trend is also similar regarding the factor “Opportunity to play in a bowl game”.

Table 5
Comparison of Inter-Tertile Ranges

College-Choice Factor	All Respondents (<i>n</i> = 73)	Lowest Inter-Tertile Range (<i>n</i> = 24)	Middle Inter-Tertile Range (<i>n</i> = 25)	Highest Inter-Tertile Range (<i>n</i> = 24)
	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.61 (1)	2.62 (2)	2.50 (9)	2.70 (1)
Total academic value of the college’s degree	2.54 (2)	2.58 (4)	2.50 (9)	2.54 (2)
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.53 (3)	2.46 (7)	2.76 (1)	2.38 (4)
Reputation of the college head coach	2.52 (4)	2.54 (5)	2.61 (3)	2.42 (3)
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.49 (5)	2.42 (9)	2.71 (2)	2.33 (5)
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.45 (6)	2.50 (6)	2.56 (6)	2.29 (7)
Academic reputation of the college	2.41 (7)	2.62 (2)	2.30 (17)	2.29 (7)
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.40 (8)	2.43 (8)	2.56 (6)	2.21 (12)
Playing in front of large crowds and/or a sold-out stadium	2.39 (9)	2.42 (9)	2.58 (4)	2.17 (14)
Opportunity to win a national championship	2.38 (10)	2.33 (15)	2.58 (4)	2.22 (11)
	***	***	***	***
Overall campus atmosphere and environment	2.28 (13)	2.65 (1)	2.04 (31)	2.17 (13)

TV and media exposure for the college, football team, and/or conference	2.26 (14)	2.17 (15)	2.52 (8)	2.08 (16)
Opportunity to finish in the top 25 in the polls (nationally ranked) every year	2.25 (16)	2.22 (12)	2.50 (9)	2.04 (17)
Degree programs and academic courses offered	2.35 (11)	2.35 (14)	2.36 (15)	2.33 (5)
Quality of the football center's facilities	2.33 (12)	2.29 (18)	2.44 (12)	2.25 (9)
Location of the college (town, city, and/or state)	2.26 (14)	2.38 (12)	2.16 (25)	2.25 (9)

Note. The scale ranged from 0 (*Not Influential*) to 3 (*Extremely Influential*)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores for each respective inter-tertile range

Another interesting observation occurred when comparing “Academic reputation of the college”, “Total academic value of the college’s degree”, and “Degree programs and academic courses offered.” All three of these factors ranked in the top ten by respondents in the highest inter-tertile range, while only “Total academic value of the college’s degree” ranked in the top ten for respondents in the middle inter-tertile range (rank tied for ninth). “Degree programs and academic courses offered” did not rank in the top ten for participants in the lowest inter-tertile range, suggesting that they were more influenced by getting a degree at the institution in any major versus those from the highest inter-tertile range who were influenced by specific “Degree programs and academic courses offered.” Table 5 also offers evidence to support that participants in the middle inter-tertile range are more likely to be influenced by athletically-related factors than academically-related factors, as noted in the relative rankings.

Another college-choice factor worthy of being noted due to differences across inter-tertile ranges is “Overall campus atmosphere and environment.” Respondents from the lowest inter-tertile range ranked this factor first (i.e., most influential) as compared to participants in the middle and highest inter-tertile ranges who ranked it thirty-first and thirteenth, respectively. The implications of these results will now be discussed.

Discussion

Athletic administrators and coaches can use the results from this study to develop, enhance, and market the brand(s) of individual teams, an athletic department, and institution. In essence, when coaches understand specific college-choice factors, they are provided with an opportunity to build their program’s brand equity by recruiting and attracting prospective student-athletes who are a mutual fit from the perspectives of the student-athlete, sport program, and university (Apostolopoulou, 2002; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Canale et al., 1996; Gladden & Funk, 2002). Moreover, it is critical for athletic administrators and coaches to use this examination to enhance their efficiency during the recruiting process as well as gain a better understanding of how to effectively cater to the wants, needs, and expectations of their student-athletes (Davis & Van Dusen, 1975; Mixon et al., 2004). Implications of this process will be discussed in-depth to further illustrate the benefits of understanding and leveraging the factors that influence student-athletes when selecting an institution.

Implications of Cumulative College-Choice Factors

Coaches and athletic administrators who understand the most influential reasons why prospective student-athletes choose their academic institutions are better able to attract recruits to enroll at their respective institution by engaging in effective relationship marketing with prospective student-athletes (Johnson, Jubenville, & Goss, 2009; Kotler, 2004). Furthermore, coaches can use the results of this study to highlight the most influential college-choice factors which is intended to maximize student-athlete's perceived human capital and attract them to attend the university (Dumond et al., 2008).

The college-choice factor that proved to be the most influential, overall, to prospective student-athletes who signed an athletic grant-in-aid during the college-selection process was "Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football." However, it should be noted that respondents represented by the middle inter-tertile range ranked this factor tied for ninth.

According to the theories of lifetime human capital, it was not surprising that seven of the top ten most influential factors were athletically-related for a sample of NCAA Division I FBS football student-athletes (Dumond et al., 2008). According to the theoretical framework put forth by Dumond et al. (2008), the results of this study could suggest that the target population was profoundly influenced by factors that could prepare them for the professional football labor market (immediate) in addition to the broader labor market (long-term). Consequently, it is critical that coaches and athletic administrators adopt a CSR perspective to holistically develop their student-athletes for life after sports.

However, one cannot ignore the outcome that the top two most influential college-choice factors were not athletically-related, suggesting that prospective football student-athletes also have expectations of actively pursuing a meaningful college education, not just to play football. Anecdotally speaking, it may be that the current system of coaches driven by winning, specialized athlete academic advising (which may imply that individualized academic support services are necessitated for student-athletes since they may be drastically underprepared academically), the perpetuation of dumb-jock stereotypes, and a limited support system of teammates contribute to those expectations not currently being met once the football players arrived at their respective FBS institution.

As a result of the general lack of academically-related factors that influence college-selection by FBS football players in this sample, it is vital for athletic administrators and coaches to have a structure in place to emphasize the academic balance that is necessitated amid the football culture in an institution of higher education. Mentors in leadership positions must use the results of this study to promote the genuine pursuit of a meaningful college education and not just a diploma (i.e., avoid becoming victim to merely "majoring in eligibility"). Additionally, personnel in leadership positions must utilize their short four to five years with football student-athletes to make strides to address the myopia of a long-term professional football playing career.

Although coaches and athletic administrators should accept accountability for the student-athletes they recruit by facilitating student-athlete development services, student-athletes must also assume responsibility and face the realization that all playing careers come to an end. Therefore, in order to enhance the quality and brand equity of their "product" (i.e., sport program), coaches and athletic administrators must foster and encourage their student-athletes to

attain a meaningful education that will lay them a foundation for the rest of their lives, long after their football playing career is over (Johnson et al., 2009; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Lawlor, 1998). This study also offers additional valuable insights based on the segmented samples of the population.

Implications Based on Segmentation by Hometown Median Annual Household Income

This study was designed to gain insight regarding the most influential college-choice factors of football players at the institution based on differences in the hometown environment, notably median annual household income. Overall, it could be argued that respondents from the middle inter-tertile range were profoundly influenced by athletically-related college-choice factors, demonstrated by the outcome that the top eight factors were athletically related. Although the other two segments also demonstrated a high number of athletically-related factors that comprised the top ten, the top two factors for those segments were non-athletically related; therefore, respondents in the middle inter-tertile range were unique for collectively ranking “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” and “Total academic value of the college’s degree” lower than the top two.

Generally speaking, respondents comprising the middle inter-tertile range were least influenced by academically-related factors. One alternative hypothesis may have been that participants in the lowest inter-tertile range would be least influenced by academics due to the theory that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less prepared academically, but this was not the case. One plausible explanation may be that individuals who lived in the lower income environments were more motivated to receive their education for the pursuit of upward social mobility than their peers who came from the middle inter-tertile range (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Similarly, individuals that represented the highest inter-tertile range may have been more motivated by academically-related factors than the middle inter-tertile range group because they did not want to experience downward social mobility due to a lack of education. Consequently, there may be a need to investigate this particular segment of football student-athletes (i.e., student-athletes who come from hometowns whose median annual household income ranges between \$34,708-\$47,150) since they may be at a higher risk of academic ineligibility. As a result, football coaches and support staff should make a sincere effort to foster the academic pursuits of all of their student-athletes. Furthermore, athletic administrators should have a structure in place that holds their personnel accountable to meeting the academic expectations of their student-athletes.

Practical Implications

A fundamental implication of this research is in order for athletic administrators and coaches to build an intentional brand, they must first agree to the elements that will help them build and develop a desired brand image (Aaker, 1991; Gladden et al., 1998). Next, athletic administrators and coaches must commit to putting personnel in place (i.e., assistant coaches, support staff, and student-athletes) that will endorse the brand and contribute to brand equity (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). When coaches have an understanding of the most influential college-choice factors, they are essentially provided with a platform to engage in CSR because they know the foundational necessities of prospective student-athletes (Johnson et al., 2009; Kotler, 2004). As a result, athletic administrators and coaches will not only have personnel with

a unified mission, but they will be able to improve the efficiency of the recruiting process while also assuming the ethical responsibility of holistically developing student-athletes.

Perhaps the most visible figures in an athletic department are head coaches, particularly due to the fact that they are most often the long-term presence of individual sport programs (as opposed to student-athletes who have a limited “shelf life” limited to four playing seasons of eligibility). Therefore, head coaches assume primary responsibility for the success of their team’s student-athletes. Although different coaches define “success” differently, to truly build brand equity in the program, the researcher recommends that coaches have a structure in place that allows his or her student-athletes to engage in personal development activities once they are on campus. Similarly, it is critical that coaches model the expected behaviors so that student-athletes are reinforced the value of personal development in areas outside of the athletic arena. Such a structure would allow student-athletes to better prepare for their future life after their playing career is over.

Analyzing the most influential college-choice factors offered controversial evidence that football student-athletes competing at the highest level may not be committed to the mission of higher education, but rather generally more influenced by athletically-related factors. Moreover, a high majority of football student-athletes are under-prepared for higher education and are often labeled as “special admits” since their standardized academic scores (i.e., SAT, ACT, and GPA) are lower than peer applicants who are admitted into the institution (Sperber, 1990). Therefore, coaches must move past only evaluating prospective student-athletes based on their height, weight, and speed and also consider recruits’ academic fit at their respective institution (Bolman & Deal, 2008). If personnel, particularly head and assistant coaches, do not face the reality of their recruits’ priorities and genuinely promote other avenues of personal development, then members of their team are in danger of leaving school, with or without a degree, deprived of a meaningful education.

Although there are multiple individuals and elements that influence a recruit regarding which college to attend, the onus of the decision ultimately falls on the prospective student-athlete. For that reason, recruits should reflect on their wants, needs, and expectations before beginning the recruiting process. If a model of self-evaluation was utilized by recruits then they would be better able to identify a college that is the best fit for their personal development.

Future Research

Upon reflecting on the results and implications of this research study, there are numerous opportunities for future research. One potential extension of the research would be to survey football players at additional colleges. A broader scope of participants would allow for one to make comparisons between different colleges within the same athletic conference, comparisons between colleges in different athletic conferences, and comparisons between colleges in different NCAA divisions. Similarly, student-athletes from other sports could participate in the study and the most influential college-choice factors could be compared between sport and/or across other demographic variables, including gender, ethnicity, scholarship status, residency status, and football position.

To supplement the current research, a longitudinal study could be employed to survey incoming student-athletes. An entrance questionnaire would examine the college-choice factors and an exit questionnaire could inquire about the student-athletes’ overall experience and preparation for life after sports. A formal exit questionnaire would likely offer valuable feedback

to develop strategies that would enhance the student-athlete experience for future student-athletes.

An additional avenue to extend this research is to focus on perceptions of athletic administrators, coaches, and support staff. For example, an identical list of college-choice factors could be presented to administrators and coaches in which they would be asked how influential do they think the college-choice factors were, in general, to their team's student-athletes during the college-selection process. Although a major limitation of a study designed such as this would be the generality in which staff would respond, the results would be beneficial to compare with the overall responses from each team's respective student-athletes. For instance, by comparing student-athletes' responses with staff's perceptions, the researcher can evaluate mutual fit principles as well as assess whether staff are meeting the wants, needs, and expectations of their student-athletes. Although there are other opportunities to expand this line of research, it is important to focus on the conclusions that can be drawn from the current study.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, a successful athletic department adds value to a college. However, "success" must be defined by individual institutions, whether that is winning records, high graduation rates, revenue generation, or elite life-skills programming. As athletic department personnel define "success," they are developing equity in their brand (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Lawlor, 1998). Possibly the most effective method of building a desired brand image is to hire coaches that embody the preferred philosophies and they will in turn recruit student-athletes who are a great fit for their institution (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The results of this study contribute to enhancing the efficiency of the recruiting process by acknowledging the most influential factors during the college-selection process. However, coaches and administrators should sincerely invest in CSR to prepare their student-athletes to be productive citizens when their sport career ends and life continues.

Although coaches are often pressured to feel like they have to win at all costs, the focus of developing student-athletes should not be compromised. Coaches serve as invaluable mentors to their student-athletes and coaches should strive to add value to their student-athletes' personal development and ultimately their perceived human capital (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Dumond et al., 2008). Athletic administrators and coaches who invest in improving the human capital of their student-athletes are likely to produce alumni who place a high value on their college experience and, in return, enhance the brand equity of the sport program, athletic department, and institution.

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