



## **Division III Student-Athlete School Selection: A College Choice Guide for Recruits and Recruiters**

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*The purpose of this study was to develop a comprehensive guide or process for NCAA Division III school selection for prospective Division III student-athletes. The developed college choice guide has two primary practical implications. First, it serves as a potential guide to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of recruiting operations for Division III coaches and athletic departments. Second, the college choice guide could aid prospective Division III student-athletes in their own Division III college selection process. In doing so, this work also furthers the literature regarding college choice and, more specifically, college choice for prospective Division III student-athletes. Moreover, the study furthers our understanding of the Division III athletics college choice and recruiting environment as institutions continue to develop their own institutional definitions of athletics success. In all, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 71 current Division III student-athletes and 39 Division III coaches and athletics administrators at fifteen Division III institutions to gain a greater understanding of the college selection process for Division III student-athletes.*

Over the past decade, colleges and universities have adapted many strategies to combat the national trend of decreasing enrollments in higher education. From online education to increased discount rates, competition for students has never been higher. The NCAA Division III population is increasingly important in relation to strategies to maintain (or increase) enrollment as many Division III colleges and universities have begun to openly embrace athletics as a major enrollment driver for the institution (Katz et al., 2015). NCAA Division III is the largest of the three divisions with just under 450 institutions (“About Division III,” 2020). Often viewed as the idyllic image of college athletics, the Division is characterized by a lack of athletic scholarships and a philosophical emphasis on participation in activities outside of one’s sport. Athletics are especially valuable for DIII institutions as the opportunity to be a “college athlete” brings much needed tuition and fee revenue through student-athletes whom likely would have not attended that college if they could not play their sport (Katz et al., 2015).

For many Division III student-athletes, the student-athlete component is a core part of their college experience (Covell et al., 2013). Considering Division III represents the largest NCAA Division—both in terms of number of institutions and number of student-athletes (“About Division III,” 2020)—prospective Division III student-athletes represent an important segment to study regarding the factors that lead to their college choice. In their own research on general college choice models, Angulo, Pergelova, and Rialp (2010) called for a market segmentation approach, wherein specific college choice guides are developed for specific segments of potential college students. Further, Poole, Levin, and Elam (2017) called for specific attributes for a cluster of prospective college students to be examined through the lens of a broad-based college choice model such as Chapman’s (1986) college choice framework. As such, the purpose of this study is to examine the NCAA Division III school selection process. In doing so, the authors worked to address three primary motives in creating a holistic guide for this unique, no athletic scholarship setting: (a) to develop a detailed evaluation of the school choice decision factors stated by athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators, (b) to begin to propose a decision tree that could potentially aid prospective student-athletes in their Division III college selection process, and (c) to advance theory and the extant literature on college choice.

In the following section, the authors examine previous literature related to student-athlete school selection in addition to creating a foundation for a guide to better understand the NCAA Division III school selection process for prospective student-athletes. We will then further detail one particularly relevant theoretical model for college search and choice and discuss its potential application to the NCAA Division III setting. Note that “guide” and “process” are used interchangeably (1) to reflect the process prospective student-athletes may typically go through and (2) to serve as a guide for coaches and prospective student-athletes to follow in order to more efficiently and economically enable a sound matriculation decision.

## Review of Literature

### *Student-Athlete College Choice*

Previous research has established that the college choice process for Division III student-athletes is centered primarily on the academic institution as a whole rather than solely the athletics program (Konnert & Giese, 1987; Pauline, 2010). However, while Division III athletic

departments may not generate much revenue from external revenue sources such as ticket sales, corporate sponsorships, and broadcasting rights deals (relative to their Division I brethren) and wins and losses may not have as dramatic of an impact on athletic department revenue, attracting student-athletes is still of vital importance to Division III athletic departments (Covell et al., 2013; Katz et al., 2015). Further, although Division III student-athletes do not receive athletic scholarships, findings from Covell et al.'s (2013) case study on NCAA student-athlete matriculation indicated that participating in Division III athletics is not merely an ancillary component of student-athletes' college experiences; rather, being a Division III student-athlete is a core component of their college experience. As such, gaining a greater understanding of the segment of prospective Division III student-athletes is warranted.

Covell et al. (2013) emphasized, "It can be argued recruiting is about resource acquisition. Student-athletes are one of the resources necessary for the maintenance of winning programs" (p. 32) and that, at the NCAA Division III level, on-field success may not necessarily have the same financial implications at Division III institutions as their Division I and Division II counterparts. Moreover, Katz et al., (2015) intimated that, for Division III institutions, there may be alternate definitions of success that are valued more above and beyond winning

In their review of student-athlete college choice, Magnusen, Kim, Perrew, and Ferris (2014) called for more investigations to help athletic departments measure recruiting effectiveness. Importantly, prospective college student-athletes must also navigate the unique additional search constraint of finding a quality athletics fit, in addition to traditional college selection factors (Huffman et al., 2016). Understanding the college selection process is pertinent for coaches and athletic departments as competition for student-athletes- and the importance of student-athletes as a form of resource acquisition- intensifies (Covell et al., 2013).

### *Approaches for College Choice*

The process by which high school students determine if and where to attend college is a complex and multifaceted endeavor. Several prominent models detailing the stages involved in the college choice process have been developed, beginning with the work of Chapman (1981), in which a model depicts the college choice process as developmental in nature, and includes various stages that an individual may go through before ultimately making a decision (Perna, 2006). College choice studies have primarily used one of three theoretical approaches: economical, psychological, or sociological (Paulsen, 1990). Within each of these models, there are several factors that further explain the reasoning behind why students choose to attend a specific college. Although these approaches are far from mutually exclusive with respect to an individual's college choice process, they offer further explanation for why certain types of institutions appeal to various students.

*Economic, Psychological, and Sociological Approaches.* An economic approach to college choice is defined as the rational and financially sensible way to decide where to attend college (Palmer et al., 2012). Attending college can be viewed as an investment. Those using an economic approach argue that students search for the college that will offer the highest return on their investment (Menon, 2004). Under the economic approach, students should leave college with a greater capacity to either earn more money or advance in society, and preferably both (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2013). Studies focus on pragmatic factors such as tuition prices, cost of living, and travel costs. In addition to upfront costs, these studies center on job placement

upon graduating (Menon et al., 2007). Not surprisingly, financial aid plays a large role under the economic approach to college choice. Tangentially related, a student's socioeconomic background and family contribution are crucial to understanding the type of institution they choose to attend (Wilkins et al., 2013).

The psychological approach to college choice focuses on both individual and institutional factors (Palmer et al., 2012). A psychological approach to the college choice process assumes that students are less concerned with what they will get out of attending the institution as opposed to how much they will enjoy their experience (Perna, 2006). Campus climate is a multidimensional construct typically consisting of items such as perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and levels of satisfaction. These measures are often used to determine if a student is a good 'fit' for a given institution (Ryder & Mitchell, 2013). Other important factors to consider when using a psychological approach are location (rural or suburban, West Coast or Midwest), size of undergraduate enrollment, and available areas of study (Palmer et al., 2012).

Family social class, individual social characteristics, and overarching socio-cultural factors are combined to provide the process for sociological approaches to college choice (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2013). Researchers applying a sociological approach to college choice oftentimes use social capital as a determining factor for what type of institution a potential student may show interest in (Bourdieu et al., 1993). Social capital refers to the value that social networks and relationships can have in situations such as applying for a job or choosing where to attend college (Griffin et al., 2012). Parents' level of education oftentimes can be a significant indicator of both whether a student will decide to go to college as well as where the student decides to enroll (Kim & Schneider, 2005). Social capital is often used as a tool to help gather information during search stage of college selection, and potentially aid in the process of being admitted to a particular institution during the choice stage (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2013).

*Theoretical Model For College Search and Choice.* While economic, psychological, and sociological categories can help to explain the weight that each category may carry in the college choice process, it is also important to understand the arc of the college selection process. Chapman (1986) developed a behavioral theory of the college selection process that captured the interrelated stages of the college selection process and asserted, "This theory is also useful in establishing a process within which past and current research efforts in the college selection domain may be classified" (p. 246). Understanding Chapman's model provides an appropriate model with which to use to apply the varying aforementioned categories valued in the college selection process (economic, psychological, sociological) to the specific NCAA Division III student-athlete college choice setting. Since Chapman's (1986) college choice model is utilized as the primary framework in this study, the entire model will be detailed. Then, details regarding how other literature has expanded upon Chapman's model are discussed.

Chapman's (1986) "Model of the College Selection Process" includes five stages: pre-search behavior, search behavior, application decision, choice decision, and matriculation decision. The pre-search state encompasses the time in which a potential college student identifies the possibility of enrolling in college at some point. The length of this stage can vary dramatically based on how early a student makes such an identification. For example, a student may develop his or her desire to model his or her education after their parents that attended college and decide to attend college well before high school. Alternatively, another student could wait until junior or senior year to even begin thinking about the possibility of attending college

someday. This phase primarily focuses on the decision of whether or not to attend college and does not yet address looking for specific college options (Chapman, 1986).

The search phase begins once a student has definitively decided that they want to attend college, usually during the high school years (Chapman, 1986). It encompasses identifying desirable characteristics of a college as well as then looking for colleges that meet those characteristics. A student in this stage will do an extensive amount of information gathering by receiving information directly from colleges, seeking out information from colleges, and consulting others familiar with colleges (e.g. high school teachers, friends currently in college, parents, older siblings). This is a very active information-gathering phase and ultimately concludes with a student developing a set of schools that they are very interested in.

The application stage occurs when the prospective students submit applications to a specified set of institutions. The application set indicates the student is serious about attending one of the chosen colleges. Students typically apply to schools they have a reasonable chance of getting into, but may also apply to several back-up institutions where they should realistically be accepted. Chapman (1986) indicated that during the application decision phase, students do not yet know the formalized financial aid offer they will receive from each school. There is uncertainty throughout this stage (and the next phase) based on the expectation of admission to a particular college. Chapman (1986) stated that this uncertainty is especially true for selective academic colleges.

The choice decision stage includes the student deciding about where to attend college based on a set of schools that they have formally received notification of acceptance into the school (Chapman, 1986). Based on the assumption that the student was knowledgeable about each school they applied to, the choice phase does not involve a lot of new information-gathering. However, the choice decision phase does involve making a decision that takes into account the financial aid offerings of each school (Chapman, 1986). Financial aid packages may play a very large role in the college choice decision. Once accepted into multiple institutions, the prospective student factors in the perspective positive or negative factors of each school. This phase culminates with the selection of a specific school to attend.

The student's institutional selection and the transition to said university usually occur during the same academic year. The student selects the institution of choice during the spring term and enrolls during the subsequent fall. In between the spring and fall terms, the student may elect to attend a different school, or no school at all.

This study utilizes Chapman's (1986) model of college choice as a college choice framework for several reasons. Chapman (1986) was one of the first to merge consumer behavior and higher education when looking at college choice (Maringe, 2006; Sabir et al., 2013). For successful marketing in higher education, it is important to understand "institutional positioning in a competitive market" (Oliveira & Soares, 2016, p. 127). Chapman was also one of the first to examine college choice through the lens of institutional positioning in a competitive environment (Oliveira & Soares, 2016). Angulo et al. (2010) looked to extend Chapman's (1986) rational approach to college choice by also accounting for the influence of the emotional perspective. Angulo et al., (2010) called for future research to a proposed "explanatory model that integrates different rational and emotional factors" (p. 13). The Division III college choice model proposed in this study involved examining Chapman's (1986) model with an added proposed integration of emotional factors. These factors may be partially related to economic, psychological, and sociological approaches.

Other extensions of Chapman's (1986) model are of particular import to this study. Paulsen (1990) expanded Chapman's (1986) model by calling for more emphasis on the investment value of attending a particular college. Dixon and Martin (1991) built upon Chapman's model by advocating for a closer look at the role of influencers in the college choice process. Hamrick and Hossler (1996) asserted the importance of a college choice model such as Chapman's by viewing college choice as a means of maintaining or increasing social status. Poole et al. (2017) argued for an attribute cluster approach – as opposed to a college rankings approach – for college choice. Poole et al. (2017) advocated for a broader context model – such as Chapman's (1986) model – to be utilized for a college choice process if a particular market segment has been identified. Poole et al. (2017) asserted that a “central implication” (p. 18) of their article and proposed college choice process (i.e. – a focus on attributes for a specific segment of prospective students and then using a broad-based college choice framework such as Chapman's model) could make the college choice process less daunting. In this study, we posit a college choice model for the specific market segment of Division III prospective student-athletes and use Chapman's (1986) model of college choice as an initial framework.

## Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 71 student-athletes and 39 coaches and/or athletic administrators at a total of fifteen different NCAA Division III institutions. Student-athletes, athletic administrators, and coaches were interviewed in order to contextualize responses and to assess consistencies in the college selection process from primary constituency groups (i.e., recruiters and decision-makers) involved in the college choice process at the NCAA Division III level. Moreover, while student-athletes provided prospective from their own micro-level experiences, coaches were able to add insight into more macro-level strategies related to team and departmental goals. Data was collected at Division III institutions in the following nine states: Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin.

Authors One and Four conducted all interviews in-person on the home campuses of the student-athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators after initially contacting athletic directors and coaches to request access to the university. The authors contacted athletics directors initially based on prior connections formed as former Division III student-athletes and college athletics employees. Data collection trips were planned and the sites for data collection were coordinated. As data collection neared completion, data collection likely could have stopped due to data saturation (Gratton & Jones, 2004). However, the authors did not want to renege on commitments to the athletics administrators who had worked to help coordinate the interviews. Interviews were primarily conducted in a conference room in the athletic department of each institution. After Author One conducted interviews at a subset of institutions, an initial round of coding was completed. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), “codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (p. 56). More details regarding the overall coding process are detailed in the Analysis subsection. After the initial round of coding, the authors completed interviews at the remaining institutions once it was determined more interviews could be conducted after substantial interest was expressed by contacted athletic directors to participate in the study.

## Procedures

Each interview was conducted on the participant's campus and lasted between 15 and 45 minutes, and included questions related to athletic background, recruiting, the college selection process, and the Division III experience. A diverse assortment of graduating class, sport, and gender were represented. Seventy-one student-athletes took part in the interview process – of the 71 student-athletes, 33 were male and 38 were female and represented the following classes: nine freshmen, 12 sophomores, 23 juniors, 26 seniors, and one graduate student. Different sports were represented as well, including: basketball, soccer, baseball, tennis, track and field, softball, swimming and diving, football, volleyball, lacrosse, golf, hockey, and gymnastics.

An interview guide was used and the interview was conducted in a semi-structured format (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The interview guide was developed based on prior literature on the Division III environment (e.g., Katz et al., 2015) and Chapman's (1986) college choice model, with alterations that accounted for the athletics participation component of the college choice process. In a semi-structured format, the researcher is able to adopt "a flexible approach to data collection and can alter the sequence of questions or probe for more information with subsidiary questions" (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 141). Although there were some differences between questions asked of student-athletes and questions asked of coaches and/or athletic administrators (e.g. coaches and administrators were asked about athletic fundraising and budgeting, student-athletes were not asked these questions), each participant was asked about the Division III college selection process (See Appendix).

## Analysis

In the current study, constructivism was utilized in order to examine the Division III student-athlete school selection process. In constructivism, the participant and the researcher subjectively cocreate understandings, and meanings are constructed by participants and observers in the natural world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Given (2008), "Constructivist qualitative research studies typically emphasize participant observation and interviewing for data generation as the researcher aims to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it" (p. 119). In constructivism, research is most often associated with qualitative studies. Sound qualitative data necessitates the use of rich, thick descriptions and explanations of specific processes within the studied context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Braun and Clarke (2006) detail the process for thematic analysis and, in doing so, articulate the compatibility of the thematic analysis approach with the constructivist paradigm. As Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasized, "Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexibility and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data" (p. 78). Further, "Thematic analysis involves the searching *across* a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86)

In developing the codes for the thematic analysis in this study, both inductive and deductive approaches were utilized- both of which are appropriate under the thematic analysis process (Braun & Clark, 2006). In using deductive- or a priori- coding, codes develop from a provisional list that can come from the literature review, conceptual framework, and/or research questions (Miles et al., 2020). Chapman's (1986) college choice framework was instrumental for exploring a priori themes (such as the pre-search phase, choice decision phase, and matriculation

phase). Additionally, more specific codes and themes related to the specific college choice process for prospective Division III student-athletes relied heavily upon the inductive process for thematic analysis in that processes for “Search by Ability” and “Search by Desire” emerged from the raw data. Themes emerging from the alignment between Chapman’s (1986) college choice framework illustrated the use of deductive coding whereas the unique conditions of the Division III college choice that emerged from the raw data inherently more so involved the inductive approach. Thematic analysis frequently involves the use of both inductive and deductive analysis (Braun & Clark, 2012).

The authors employed each of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six recursive (non-linear) steps for thematic data analysis. The first step of data familiarization involves “transcribing the data, reading and re-reading the data, and noting down initial ideas” (p. 87). Author One transcribed the recorded interviews. The authors then individually read the interview transcriptions. For step two of thematic analysis, initial codes are generated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the analysis of the data, Authors One, Two, and Four independently coded the data and relied on coding to both confirm/deny a priori themes and to discover emergent themes (Gibbs, 2009; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Coding allowed for the searching (phase three), reviewing (phase four), and defining and naming (phase five) themes. After Phase Two, the authors met to discuss both the applicability of Chapman’s (1986) college choice model to the data (deductive analysis) and emergent themes unique to the Division III college choice process (inductive analysis). In engaging in the thematic analysis process, the authors deemed the Pre-Search Phase, Choice Decision Phase, and Matriculation Decision Phase from Chapman’s (1986) model to be applicable broadly to the Division III college choice process. As such, those three broad-based themes were kept in the proposed model as part of a priori themes. Specific aspects of the Division III process are elaborated on as subthemes in those phases. Furthermore, as part of the thematic analysis process, the inductive themes of “Search By Ability” and “Search By Desire” did not fit particularly well into the pre-existing Chapman (1986) framework. As emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2006), “Inductive analysis is therefore a process of coding the data *without* trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame” (p. 84). Inductive coding is particularly relevant when data indicates “an important local factor” (Miles et al, 2020, p. 74) – in this case salient themes specific to the Division III college choice process. The “Search By Ability” and “Search By Desire” phases were developed inductively. A multitude of subthemes were developed as well that are particularly relevant for the proposed Division III college choice framework and are detailed in the proposed Division III College Choice Framework in the Results and Discussion.

### *Trustworthiness*

The authors employed Shenton’s (2004) four recommendations for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Several mechanisms are appropriate for credibility, including (a) adoption of well-established research methods, (b) debriefing sessions, (c) background qualifications and experience of the investigators and (d) triangulation. The authors utilized the well-established research method of semi-structured interviews for data collection. As detailed previously, the authors met to debrief regarding data analysis. For background qualifications and experiences of the investigators as it relates to researcher positionality, it is important to acknowledge that Authors One and Four had prior experience as Division III student-athletes while Author Three previously worked in NCAA Division III athletics administration. Using personal voice based on the investigator’s



own research positionality in rapport development with interviewees can help to create “a position of equality and mutual respect that is central to the relationship between the researcher and participant” (Doody & Noonan, 2013, p. 31). As asserted by Kerwin and Hoeber (2015), researcher positionality can aid in improving credibility and trustworthiness of data analysis. According to Shenton (2004), triangulation

may involve the use of a wide range of informants. This is one way of triangulating via data sources. Here individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behavior of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people ... Where appropriate, site triangulation may be achieved by the participation of informants within several organizations so as to reduce the effect on the study of particular local factor peculiar to one institution. Where similar results at different sites, findings may have greater credibility in the eyes of the reader. p. 64

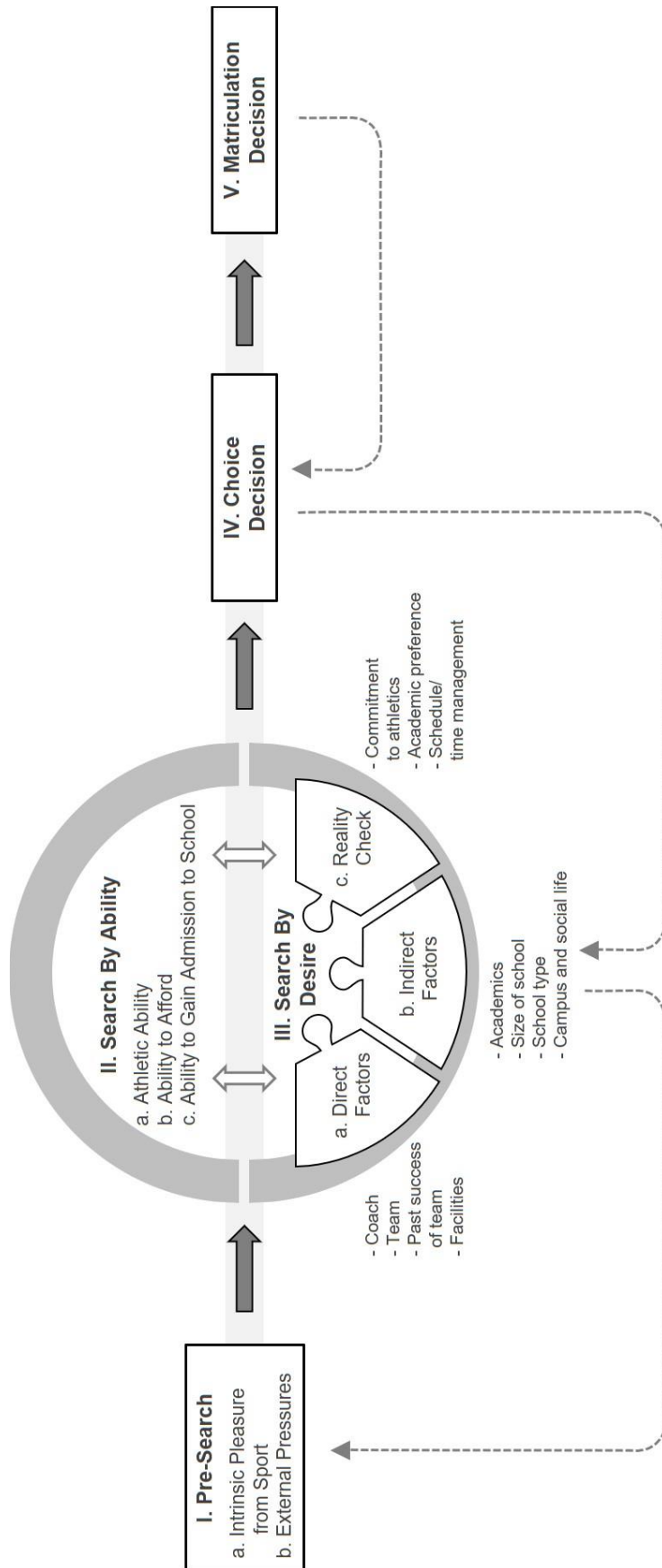
In collecting data across multiple sites and across multiple levels (i.e., student-athletes, coaches, and administrators), the authors worked to gain a rich understanding of the Division III college choice process by engaging in data triangulation.

For Shenton’s (2004) step of transferability, findings need “to allow readers to have a proper understanding of it (the data), thereby enabling them to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those they have seen emerge in their situations” (p. 69). The authors have worked to provide readers with an understanding of the proposed college choice model for Division III prospective student-athletes in a manner such that readers can compare any of their own experiences with the Division III college choice process to the proposed model. Shenton (2004) articulated that dependability be accounted for by providing details on the data collection and analysis processes to give future researchers sufficient information to “repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results” (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). Lastly, for confirmability, Shenton (2004) again emphasizes the importance of describing the details of data collection and data analysis processes to ensure that findings are a product of the data analysis processes. The authors sought to adhere to confirmability throughout the use of the thematic analysis process.

## **Results and Discussion**

A guide for Division III athletics college choice is presented below, based on analysis of participant data. The process was adapted from Chapman’s (1986) Model of the College Selection Process, and then adjusted accordingly based on the Division III athletics college choice process. While Chapman’s (1986) model is presented as a general model for college choice, we believe our findings advance Chapman’s model to a unique subset of college students: Division III student-athletes. Doing so, while very specific in nature, addresses Poole et al.’s (2017) call for using a broader college choice model such as Chapman’s model for a particular market segment. Further, the proposed guide may make the college choice process less daunting by providing a framework that could be utilized by two of the primary stakeholders involved in the Division III college choice process: the prospective student-athletes themselves and the coaches involved throughout the recruiting process.

Figure 1.  
Division III Student-Athlete College Choice Guide



The most likely interplay between phases and sub-phases occurs during the “Search By Ability” and “Search By Desire” phases. From there, prospective student-athletes likely proceed to “Choice Decision” and “Matriculation Decision.” Darkened block arrows represent “typically linear” phases. Dotted arrows are utilized to demonstrate that, sometimes, prospective student-athletes may return to prior steps as new information becomes available and new preferences emerge. In the following subsections, proposed phases and subphases are explained, representative quotes are presented verbatim, and a discussion of the interplay between the Division III athletics college choice process and Chapman’s model is detailed.

### *Pre-Search*

Chapman (1986) poses several questions regarding the pre-search phase that have applicability-albeit in a different realm-to the Division III college choice framework. In detailing the “Pre-Search” phase, Chapman asks questions regarding (a) When college-level education comes on the radar of a potential prospective student, (b) who is consulted about college options, and (c) how family, lifestyle, personal values, and student perceptions impact the value of pursuing different types of college options. When considering the relevance of a “pre-search” phase to a prospective Division III student-athlete, it is important to ask about the timeline for a prospective student-athlete becoming aware of Division III athletics, particularly considering that simple awareness of Division III athletics may not be as commonplace as the more “in-the-public eye” nature of Division I athletics. Further, simply knowing about the potential fit between the Division III level and a prospective student-athlete could also rely on the knowledge base of sport influencers (e.g., high school coach, club coach, family, etc.). In much the same way Chapman (1986) and Dixon and Martin (1991) articulated the relevance of various influences (e.g., family, lifestyle, personal values, culture) on the pre-search process, perceptions of-and knowledge about-Division III athletics may impact whether pursuing Division III athletics is even under consideration. To this point in the choice process, the pre-search phase may be relatively similar to prospective student-athletes who may ultimately matriculate as Division I or Division II student-athletes. Here, we posit that the unique aspect of Division III to the pre-search phase (in comparison to other prospective student-athletes) is more so about simply being exposed to Division III as a possibility. There are several factors that have an impact on this decision, including: intrinsic pleasure (pleasure from sport) and external pressures (e.g., parents or coaches). The Division III Student-Athlete College Choice Guide adds an additional layer to their analysis. The pre-search stage in this model occurs when a student understands his or her interest in a specific sport and determines if they desire to continue athletics into college. The pre-search stage of this model differs because of an athletic interest in addition to an academic interest. The first of these factors focuses on the intrinsic pleasure derived from participating in the chosen sport.

*Intrinsic Pleasure from Sport.* Enjoyment of one’s sport played a key role in an athlete’s decision to participate in a sport in college. This idea was made clear throughout the interviews as athletes continually stated phrases such as “*Soccer was kind of my one true passion*” or “*I was always going to play... It was just something I’m passionate about and something I really wanted to do. It was one of my goals.*” One participant summed up his enjoyment of sport by stating:

Yeah, I always wanted to play tennis. I just love the game and love competing and I wanted a small school too. So that was a factor and I just didn't want to be in a big school and just be one of the crowd. And at DIII, you're able to play.

Across the board, many of the interviewed athletes displayed a desire to play sport in college based on their intrinsic desire to do so.

*External Pressures.* Another factor that influenced student-athletes' decisions to participate in collegiate sport was the influence of outside forces such as parents, coaches, or club teams. The idea that the family has a large influence on an athlete's decision to participate in collegiate athletics parallels ideas from Student-Athlete School Selection: A Family Systems Theory Approach (Schaeperkoetter, Bass, & Gordon, 2015). As established by the study, both family participation in sport and opinion of participation in sport influenced the student-athlete's decision.

Athletes also indicated a large influence of club team pressures while in high school to participate in collegiate athletics. Outside influence of club teams confirms its significance as an external pressure through interviews with these Division III athletes. As a significant social network in an athlete's life, club teams are a form of social capital that influence a student's decision whether it be where to attend college or playing sport in college (Griffin et al., 2012). Therefore, if peers within the club sport structure opted to participate in collegiate athletics, it created added pressure to consider participation for all teammates.

A coach's words can have an instrumental impact on an athlete's life, as portrayed with participants. Coaches helped athletes decide if they wanted to attend college and if they desired to continue their sport in college. Throughout many of the interviews, it was clear that a coach, whether a past high school coach or future college coach, had a major impact on whether an athlete choose to compete in college or not. Coach behavior and the coach-athlete relationship has been widely studied (Horn & Carron, 1985; Challadurai, 1993; Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Assuming the students internal and external forces encourage participation in collegiate athletics, the student would then typically move to the next phase of the college choice process.

### *Search by Ability*

In Chapman's (1986) "Search Behavior" phase, desirable characteristics of a college are identified. The search process, in this stage, moves into higher levels of involvement as far as engaging in direct search efforts. In this proposed Division III college choice model, Search by Ability and Search by Desire encompass Chapman's (1986) Search Behavior and Application Decision phases and work to culminate in actually making application decisions. Chapman (1986) presents an array of questions for the search behavior phase that we believe have specific relevance to the Division III college choice model. Chapman poses:

- (a) How extensive is the search?
- (b) What are the specific indicators that students use in order to judge colleges on the attributes of importance?
- (c) What colleges are students aware of at the beginning of the search? Why are students aware of such colleges?
- (d) What additional colleges do students become aware of as search progresses? What accounts for these new colleges entering the awareness set?

For a prospective student-athlete at the Division III level, addressing the extensiveness of the search is relevant when considering “how wide of a net to cast” for potential college fits. If a prospective student-athlete does decide that being a college student-athlete carries a significant weight in their college experience, it is important for prospective student-athletes to be realistic about the alignment between their athletic abilities and different NCAA levels. For Chapman (1986), in addressing which information sources are consulted, specific indicators and attributes that are of varied importance impact search behavior. In relation to the Division III college choice process, awareness of Division III in general, and specific Division III colleges, impacts prospective student-athletes moving from a state of unawareness to a state of awareness about specific schools. Findings from interviewees indicate an array of attributes prospective student-athletes may consider. Here, we propose the “Search by Ability” and “Search by Desire” phases to encapsulate the attributes under consideration throughout these phases of the college choice process. Search by Ability includes (a) athletic ability, (b) ability to afford, and (c) ability to be admitted. Search by Desire includes an array of direct and indirect factors as well as a “reality check” step.

In the “Search by Ability” phase, an athlete assesses the likelihood of having the ability to participate in athletics based upon the athletics offering of an institution or the athletes’ aptitude for a particular sport. The financial implications of attending a particular school as well as the ability to be admitted to the college or university is included in the “Search by Ability” phase. This phase is similar to the search phase identified by Chapman (1986) except that under the current model, athletes focus only on the schools in which they believe they can compete in athletics.

A softball coach nicely encapsulated the core aspects of the “Search by Ability” phase when detailing,

It’s not so much of a difficulty to identify the ability and even the grades, the academics. It’s more whether or not, once (the financial aid package) comes out, can they afford to come here... The other one (hurdle) might be there’s so many people (Division III institutions) like us that are in on that person. So that becomes another issue. The third one is probably that for most athletes I think they always have a dream of playing at a higher level. So without trying to break their bubble, if they’re into their senior year, that bubble is probably broken.

Many of the student-athletes interviewed attributed their choice of athletics program based on their own ability directly out of high school. Athletics caliber can be established by either the athlete or collegiate coaches. This assessment manifests through statements such as “I only applied to schools [where] I would be able to play” or “I just didn’t think I was good enough to play Division II or Division I.” Another athlete stated that it was just “more realistic to go Division III.” A participant demonstrated her aptitude for her athletic ability by saying:

I knew I was pretty good but I mean I knew I wasn’t going to be going D1 for any of these things but there was definitely an opportunity during college visits – I would visit with a lot of coaches and kind of gauge my ability to play. So junior year when I was going on college visits was definitely like ‘okay this is where I’m placed.’

By “gauging her ability to play,” the athlete established her athletics ability by comparing herself against athletes at that each of the divisional levels. The coach can also establish an athlete’s athletics caliber by showing interest in an athlete from a Division III institution or failure to contact the athlete from a Division I or Division II institution. Several of the student-athletes interviewed had little contact with coaches at Division I or Division II institutions. Usually, the only offers athletes had were from Division III institutions. Many athletes stated that the Division III coach at their particular school “contacted them first” or “the assistant coach came to watch [her] play.” One track student-athlete claimed that his success started when he “made it to state track end of [his] junior year outdoors. Offers just started coming in. Not really Division I, just kind of Division III.” For that same athlete, being recruited by a Division III coach allowed him to see where his skills could take him athletically.

The timeline for “Athletic Ability” is also particularly interesting from the perspective of the coach when considering the general consensus that student-athletes knew they may not be skilled enough for Division I or Division II since Division I and Division II coaches did not regularly (or at all) contact them. One interviewed coach echoed this sentiment by saying, “You know, let’s be real. I don’t think too many kids want to hear from a Division III school too early.” The coach was insinuating that many prospective student-athletes who ultimately matriculate as Division III student-athletes may spend earlier high school years thinking they may have athletic ability more in line with Division I and Division II institutions and begin to consider Division III when they do not receive recruiting communication from Division I and Division II coaches.

Importantly, coaches and student-athletes alike spoke of the relevance of general levels of awareness about Division III athletics and how that impacted the college choice process. Consider the words of one head volleyball coach who shared, “The idea of Division III isn’t always understood... the stigma of a non-scholarship sport. Or being a non-scholarship. You know, everyone wants to be able to put in their Christmas letter that Betty or Johnny got a scholarship.

*Finances* . The financial aspect of a student-athlete’s choice of college parallels the economic approach to choosing a college (Palmer et al., 2012). As athletes begin to narrow down the list of schools to attend, an economic approach may alter the students’ choices. According to Wilkins, Shams, and Huisman (2013), a student’s socioeconomic background can alter the institution they choose to attend, thus altering where the athlete participates in his or her sport. If an athlete is unable to attend a school because of a lack of finances, that athlete cannot participate on that athletic team. With no athletic scholarship available at the Division III level, student-athletes have to rely solely on financial aid and academic scholarships to help with tuition. This difference in socioeconomic status leads to some student-athletes looking at specific schools while others are financially uninhibited in their selection process.

Inability to pay for school plays a large role in where student-athletes can attend college. Several athletes echoed this idea by stating that “finances were a huge part” or “90% of what [she] considered” for attending school was cost-related. Athletes have to find other ways to pay for these Division III colleges since they are not able to receive athletic scholarships. Some athletes receive academic scholarships or can receive funding through financial aid, student loans, or their families. Other student-athletes had a completely different outlook on finances and the role it plays when choosing a college. Several athletes were unaware of how much school was or understood that finances would not be a problem for them, describing their situation as

“income not being an issue” or cost not being “a huge difference maker.” For the majority of the student-athletes interviewed, they showed a concern for the cost of college and tended to alleviate this concern through outside sources. In this case, cost of attending college and whether or not that played a role, inhibited or enhanced where the student-athlete could attend.

### *Search by Desire*

During the “Search by Desire” portion of the decision-making process, the athlete poses the question “Why do I want to play sports in college?” This question can be manipulated by several factors throughout the decision-making process. Some of these factors include the coach’s influence, team influences, the campus, the school atmosphere, academics (or specifically, intended major), facilities of the athletics department or team, size of the school, whether the school is private or public, or the reputation of the team or the team’s record. These factors are split into two types: direct and indirect factors. The direct factors include factors that could directly affect the athlete’s choice in athletic program such as the coach, the team, the reputation of the team, or the athletic facilities. Indirect factors may not necessarily affect participation on the athletic team but do affect the athlete’s choice of school. These indirect factors include academics, campus, size of school, and whether the school is private or public.

*Direct Factors* . Direct factors have an immediate effect on the athlete’s choice to participate in collegiate athletics at a specific school and are directly related to the athletics program. These factors include the coach’s influence, the influence of the team, the reputation of the team, and the athletic facilities.

*Coach*. Interviews revealed that the collegiate coach can play a substantial role in students’ decision to continue participating in college sports. A bad experience with a coach, can lead to an athlete rejecting that school. Some athletes chose to attend their program because of the coach’s attitude toward the team, the sport, or their style of coaching. Many of the athletes claimed that the coach was the deciding factor or a major factor when choosing to participate at a certain university. The athlete’s perception of the relationship with his or her coach affects satisfaction in training, creating a need for the athlete to get along with the coach before they commit to the athletic program (Yang, Jowett, & Chan, 2014). These findings show the vitality of the compatibility of the coach-athlete relationship in regard to the “Search by Desire” phase of the decision-making process.

An athlete’s perception of the coach is influenced by the coach’s well-being or coaching style with the athlete (Stebbins et al., 2016). An athlete believes they are satisfied with a coach when they meet the athlete’s basic needs and well-being (Davis & Jowett, 2014). This looks different for each athlete, but this satisfaction is what athletes are searching for in the “Search by Desire” phase. Because coaches have a strong and direct influence on their athletes, getting along with the coach and agreeing with his or her coaching style is vital when choosing an athletics program (Doyle & Gaeth, 1990; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007; Pauline et al., 2008).

*Team*. For the majority of the student-athletes interviewed, a feeling of belonging or being able to get along with the team had a major impact on their decision of where to participate in collegiate athletics. College students use a psychological approach when determining if the university is the “right fit” for them (Ryder & Mitchell, 2013). Student-athletes have a similar experience when choosing to participate on a collegiate team. The student-athletes perception of the team is often the determining factor of if the student believes the team will be the right fit.

Perception is determined based on the student's view of the team's attitude, behavior and level of satisfaction. Social atmosphere of the team was an influential factor for Division I student-athletes (Doyle & Gaeth, 1990), showing that athletes continue to use social atmosphere of the team as a deciding factor in the decision-making process regardless of the level of play.

*Past success of the team.* The reputation of the team or the team's record had a major impact on some athletes when deciding where to participate in collegiate athletics at the Division III level. When athletes were accepted to the school of their choosing based off several "Search by Ability" factors and academic reasons, the reputation of the team was a selling point for many.

From the athletes interviewed, reputation of the team plays a role in the decision-making process for a student-athlete, even if that role is not major. Reputation of an athletic team has not been widely studied with student-athletes in their college and team selection process. However, the reputation of an institution's academic program has been analyzed as a factor in student-athlete choice in university. Pauline (2010) found that reputation of academic major or program was a significant influence for Division I, II, and III lacrosse players. The idea that the reputation of an academic major or program parallels the reputation of an athletic team. Konnert and Giese (1987) found similar results but also found that the reputation of a school's conference (in basketball) was a minor factor in the decision-making process for a student athlete. Pauline (2005) found that a winning program was a significant factor for baseball players when deciding where to play in college.

*Facilities.* The caliber of athletic facilities factored into the decision of some of the student-athletes. The facilities factor led some athletes to reject colleges with unwanted facilities, but mostly confirmed a decision that athletes wanted to participate on a certain athletic program. According to Konnert and Giese (1987), locker room facilities was a minor influence for collegiate athletes whereas the physical appearance of the campus was a larger influence. However, the findings of the present study differ from Konnert and Giese (1987). While many athletes interviewed in this study claimed that facilities were a deciding factor for them, previous studies have noted that facilities play only a minor factor in institutional selection (Pauline et al., 2005).

*Indirect Factors.* Indirect factors do not have a direct effect on the athlete's choice on athletic program, but these factors do influence what school the athlete wants to attend. These factors include academic reputation or major, the campus, size of the school, whether the institution was public or private, and a potentially more flexible schedule. Each of these factors led the students to decide where they wanted to attend college, and indirectly affected their participation in Division III athletics at a particular institution.

*Academics.* One of the biggest influences for the majority of these student-athletes was the desire to be at a school that would help to meet their academic interests and goals. Such desires played an important role in their search for prospective colleges. A participant at [college] stated that academics "had a huge impact in my decision. I wanted to combine great academics with a great program. But I had seven other schools that did that." A combination of athletics and academics was the ideal college experience for these athletes. Academics helped this student-athlete to narrow his choices to seven but was not the final factor in the decision-making process. Many other athletes expressed this desire to combine great athletics with great academics, and usually put academics ahead of athletics when deciding where to participate in sport. A senior student-athlete reiterated her feelings on putting academics first by stating:



I thought about it and I had that opportunity to go to the bigger school and have the scholarship which would have been great but I also my main decision was the education here. I don't really know much about the D1 education compared to here, but realized also that I wasn't coming to college just to play softball and I was coming here to get an education and I wanted a good education so that's why I ultimately ended up choosing D3 is because of the academic aspect they have on things.

Even with a school that may have been more financially responsible, this student-athlete chose her particular school because of the academic reputation of the school. Several other studies of student-athletes show that academics is a major influence when considering a college and athletic program (Konnert et al., 1987; Pauline, 2005; Pauline et al., 2008; Pauline et al., 2010). These studies reveal that academics is a major deciding factor for athletes if not the most influential factor in the decision-making process. According to Pauline and colleagues (2005), Division III student-athletes were more influenced by academics when deciding to participate in a collegiate athletic program than their counterparts at Division I and II institutions. Pauline (2010) also found that the influence of academics on athletes' decision-making process was significantly higher at Division II and Division III universities than at Division I universities.

*Size of school.* The size of the school was a major factor for most of the athletes interviewed. These athletes tended to desire a small school with a tight-knit community, leading them to choose a Division III school rather than a Division I or Division II school. A student-athlete at one of the institutions explained his choice when he said, "I liked the small class sizes, small campus. I didn't want to be on a big campus. I knew a couple of people here already and they liked it a lot." Several other athletes valued a small college or small campus. The size of the school allowed for these athletes to reject larger schools, indirectly affecting where they would participate in collegiate athletics. From a psychological perspective, this influence could be due to family ties, similarity to high school or hometown, or personality traits. School size is not widely studied regarding athletes' decision of athletic program. Within the present study, the size of school did emerge as a relevant factor for participation.

*School type.* Some athletes preferred public institutions to private institutions due to cost, personal preference, school atmosphere, or size of the school. Despite the reason, the type of institution of the school made a difference to some athletes and facilitated in the decision-making process for collegiate athletics. As another minor influence, the type of institution (public or private) did not factor into the decision-making process as much as academics, availability of desired major, or athletic influences. While most studies disregarded type of institution, Kankey and Quarterman (2007) found that affiliation of the university (religion, public, private) only had a minor influence on Division I athlete's choice of college.

*Campus and social life.* When it comes to choosing an institution to continue participate in collegiate athletics, many athletes chose the Division III level because they felt that they were able to participate in a wider range of opportunities on campus and were able to experience a social life outside of athletics. Athletes noted that the opportunity to engage in extracurricular activities outside of athletics was a major factor in selecting a Division III level.. With more free time and less of a hectic schedule than Division I or II athletes, Division III student-athletes boasted of their time to become similar to regular students. Student-athletes consider social life as an important aspect for their choice in college as a means to gain social capital. When an athlete sees an opportunity to gain social capital, they will choose the school

with a greater opportunity (Bourdieu et al., 1993). From a psychological perspective, the athlete may choose an institution where they feel more of a sense of belonging due to the social aspects of that given institution. Kankey and Quarterman (2007) found that social atmosphere of the team was one of the most influential factors for Division I softball players in choosing a school to attend. Finley & Fountain (2008) found similar results when studying Division II female athletes in regard to comfort level and social satisfaction. Anticipation of social life on the team may influence athletes in their decision-making processes on a psychologically individualistic basis.

**Reality Check.** As part of the “Reality Check” portion of the decision-making process, the prospective student-athlete questions if becoming a student-athlete is realistic at the collegiate level. Factors that may influence this decision are willingness to comply with a schedule that includes both academic and athletic time commitments, dealing with the extra stressor of athletics, academic preference over athletics, and dedication to the sport. The athlete takes all the information they have on the desired school and athletic program and decides whether or not this will be doable.

This portion of the process does not follow Chapman’s model Application step (Chapman, 1986). In athletics, the application portion of the decision-making process is woven into several other steps. Once the athlete is in contact with a coach, they are “accepted” by the program. Not being recruited by a Division I or Division II program (or a poor fit if recruited) serves as another “reality check” for prospective student-athletes. Other factors may inhibit the athlete from being accepted into the school such as financial aid and acceptance rate of the school.

The “reality check” is a portion of the decision-making process that student-athletes specifically go through. This “reality check” step was added as a critical step to ensure that the student-athlete makes the correct decision in becoming a student-athlete at the collegiate level. The reality check step represents the step in which an athlete makes a quick decision based on their commitment to become a collegiate student-athlete. However, the step may also be a time where they factor in the hectic schedule of a student-athlete, and their dedication to the sport, and academic preferences.

**Commitment to athletics.** If the athlete is not committed to their sport once the reality of becoming a college athlete is near, that athlete will opt out of participating in collegiate athletics. However, if the athlete has enough dedication to his or her sport, willingness to participate in sport will take precedence over other factors such as time management or attending another institution and not participating in college athletics. Depending on the level of commitment to their sport, this factor is key in beginning participation in collegiate athletics. A male basketball player shared similar sentiments of many other participants when he said:

You’re going to have to be 100% in and you’re going to have to be dedicated to what you do and you have to love it because there are no athletic scholarships to receive so this is basically you’re just playing because you love the sport.

At the Division III level, there is no athletic scholarship to serve as an incentive for student-athletes. A male swimmer explained that at the Division III level, athletics has to take precedence over other areas of life as well:

The life of a student-athlete is just simply much more grueling. It's something where every single day, I'm forced to think about, 'if I didn't swim, I could be doing, X, Y, and Z every single day'. And because I do swim, I can't do those. But it's a conscious decision to say, 'you know what, that's okay. Because everything I gain as far as happiness, fitness, lifestyle that I get from athletics is way more important than saying well I could be rock climbing twice a week or I could be doing X,Y,Z.

He explains that every day an athlete has to make a commitment to the sport over other activities or commitments in life. A female tennis student-athlete explained that Division III athletics is "definitely a commitment and it's not as much so to speak as a job as DI but DIII definitely is hard work and a choice that you need to stick to and kind of tests yourself on a daily basis." A junior women's basketball student-athlete explained the amount of commitment in Division III athletics:

They do emphasize your studies before athletics. It's still a commitment. And I think that's one of the biggest misconceptions about D3 is the commitment that you make to the team. It's not like an intramural team or whatever. It is a huge commitment that you make to be part of.

Commitment to athletics will define the relationship the athlete has with the sport in a collegiate setting. Without a commitment to athletics at the Division III level, there is no extra incentive for the athlete to stay and continue his or her athletic participation. Because of this, the level of commitment an athlete has to his or her sport will become a deciding factor in the "reality check" portion of the Division III Student-Athlete College Choice Process. Enjoyment and commitment to one's sport generally comes from an intrinsic desire to continue participation. Previous studies have shown that enjoyment of sport is a positive predictor on whether or not the athlete will continue playing sport (Atkins et al., 2013; Puente-Diaz, 2012; Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Several factors can affect an athlete's commitment to sport through their enjoyment such as coaching style, intrinsic desire to succeed, team atmosphere, and motivational climate of the team (Puente-Diaz, 2012; Tamminen, 2016). Whatever the reason may be, an athlete must have a certain level of commitment at the Division III level to continue play on a collegiate team without the incentive of an athletic scholarship.

*Academic preference.* Committing to play a sport at a Division III university also means that the athlete has an understanding that academics will always come first; a key factor in the "Search by Desire" phase of the Division III Student-Athlete College Choice Process. In the "Reality Check" phase, an athlete decides if putting academics first is doable and if that is truly the kind of college and athletic experience they desire. A sophomore women's volleyball player explained that "You're at that school because you can handle the academics and you want to have an academic career after you graduate." She has an understanding that she came to play volleyball but in four or five years, she will have a degree and a career and that is what she decides to put first. A senior women's soccer player explained that some athletes choose Division III because of academics:

Especially if those better athletes are interested in something more than the sport. You can be a Division I caliber athlete but be interested in music (as a major) or something like that, whereas if you decided to go D1, you wouldn't have time to do that. Because a

lot of times, they're like you can't even have this major and play this sport. Whereas, at Division III, you can do all this stuff and still excel in the sport that you're playing so I think that has a lot to do with it too.

In the "Reality Check" step, the athlete must understand that academics comes before athletics and if that is the kind of academic and athletic career they desire. This factor is critical in the "Reality Check" portion of the decision-making process. As student-athletes, the athlete has to find a balance between academics and athletics. As shown in previous studies, academics is a more influential factor in the decision-making process for Division II and Division III schools compared to Division I schools (Pauline, 2010). Division III athletes understand that academics takes precedence over athletics and must consider that when in the "Reality Check" phase of the decision-making process. This same study found the most influential factors across all three divisions were (ranked most to least influential): academics, coaching staff, social atmosphere, financial aid, and athletics. Understanding that academics takes precedence over athletics and making a decision from there is key in the "Reality Check" phase of the decision-making process.

*Schedule and time management.* The first of many deciding factors encompassed by the reality check is the reality of a busy schedule. Each student interviewed was asked to describe a typical day in their life as an athlete. Nearly every student went on in detail about their schedule and mentioned only a few hours a day of free time, and even that was dedicated to studying. A junior basketball player explained the busy schedule of a student-athlete:

It gets hectic balancing your school schedule with that because when I'd normally get done with class and I'd want to do my homework, get that out of the way, I go to practice and then I have to eat and then 'oh wow, it's really late' and I have to do homework. I have to be very conscious of my schedule.

A junior women's basketball player felt that "it forces you to do time management even more than normal college students who aren't playing a sport too, just because your time is so limited that you have."

Student-athletes must consider whether they can balance the hectic schedule of being an athlete and a college student in the "Reality Check" phase. Athletes must evaluate if the commitment and the extra stressor of athletics is worth their time and if they are able to handle that busy schedule. If the athlete realizes they cannot balance the collegiate athlete lifestyle, they will opt out of becoming a student-athlete.

### *Choice Decision*

In detailing the Choice Decision phase, Chapman (1986) emphasizes that "the need for trade-offs exist because any single college may not be dominant on each of the relevant attributes" (p. 248). This is particularly important for the proposed Division III college choice model given the wide array of attributes under consideration in the "Search by Ability" and "Search by Desire" phases proposed above. Chapman (1986) posited, "What are the relative importance of various factors in the choice process?" (p. 248). When considering how prospective student-athletes may "weigh" or "value" the attributes under consideration, we believe the economic, psychological, and sociological approaches are particularly relevant to

discuss. Specifically, we posit that some unique features of the Division III level may provide differing levels of import on various economic, psychological, and sociological approaches. Such features would then conceivably have an impact on what prospective student-athletes consider most important of the “Search by Ability” and “Search by Desire” features detailed previously.

In line with Covell et al.’s (2013) emphasis that the Division III student-athlete experience is not simply an ancillary part of the student experience- and is instead a core component of their college experience- the student-athlete component may carry a disproportionate weight in the college choice process. Covell et al. (2013) articulated the importance of athletics being received well by various stakeholders – including prospective student-athletes. In this case, looking at the connection between Chapman’s model, the Division III college choice process, and the economic, psychological, and sociological approaches is particularly insightful.

When considering the economic approach applied to the Division III college choice process, there may be “irrational” behavior if the decision to attend a school is mostly related to the opportunity to participate in athletics. In these instances, the value placed on the athletics experience attribute would carry a disproportionate weight when considering the various factors associated with “Search by Ability” and “Search by Desire.” As has been clear throughout the findings, the opportunity to participate in athletics was a primary factor in the college choice decision. Said differently, interviewees indicated they would have gone elsewhere if not for the opportunity to participate in athletics. Since, under the most basic tenets of the economic approach, college choice is based on the idea that students focus on pragmatic cost factors and job placement upon graduation (Menon, 2004; Palmer et al., 2012; Winkel-Wagner & Locks, 2013), students choosing a college based on the opportunity to be a Division III student-athlete (where there are no athletics scholarships) would seem to run counter to the economic approach serving as a primary driver in the college choice process. Instead, prospective student-athletes may adhere more so to the psychological and sociological approaches for college choice. As detailed previously, under the premise of the psychological approach, students are more so concerned with how much they will enjoy their college experience (Perna, 2006). In the case of prospective Division III student-athletes who ultimately make the choice to attend a Division III institution, the opportunity to participate in athletics- because of the enjoyment and satisfaction it could provide- may carry a disproportionate weight in the college choice process. Such notions would also align more closely with considering emotional factors (e.g., Angulo et al., 2010) in addition to Chapman’s (1986) rational choice model. In the specific market segment of prospective Division III student-athletes, having the opportunity to be a college student-athlete may serve as an emotional component of the college choice process. Additionally, the relevance of social capital, under the premise of the sociological approach, is notable given the importance of social networks and relationships in making a college choice. Prospective Division III student-athlete may place a disproportionate value on the college athletics experience because of increased social capital by being a Division III student-athlete. Social capital for Division III student-athletes could manifest itself in being a part of a clearly defined team and social group upon entry into the college environment.

The “Choice Decision” step of the Division III Student-Athlete College Choice Process aligns closely with Chapman’s Choice Decision step. Similar to Chapman’s Choice Decision phase, it is assumed that the athlete has adequate information on the school and the athletic program of choice and there is no new information gathered in this step. In contrast, Chapman’s Choice Decision step has a component based on financial aid. This step in the Division III

Student-Athlete College Choice Process lacks that component because financial aid and ability to pay for school occurs in the “Search by Ability” step (Chapman, 1986).

The Choice Decision Stage in this model occurs when an athlete has gathered all possible information about the school and the athletic program, and makes a decision based on his or her preferences and the factors discussed in the Pre-Search, Search by Ability, Search by Desire, and Reality Check phases. In this phase, the interests of the athletic program and coach align with the interests of the prospective student-athlete. For some of the athletes, the choice decision process was a complex step with a weighing of pros and cons from the previous steps of the Division III Student-Athlete College Choice Process. For others, it was a quick decision based on instinct and a gut reaction to the school. The choice decision step is an individualistic step based on each athlete and his or her preferences from the previous steps in the Division III Student-Athlete College Choice Process. It is an accumulation of knowledge from all previous steps and involves one final decision based on that information.

### *Matriculation Decision*

The final step in the Division III Student-Athlete College Choice Process is the Matriculation Decision Phase. This step of the process involves where a student actually ends up attending college. Typically, the Choice Decision and the Matriculation Decision are the same institution. A change between Choice Decision and Matriculation – albeit rare with the interviewed student-athletes – arose from a variety of factors including different expectations, lack of desire to participate, or an unhappiness with the current program. The athletes interviewed generally made a change in decision subsequent to completing a year at another college.

Three of the athletes interviewed decided to pursue an athletic career at a college different than their Choice Decision program. The first athlete to change programs did so because the first school did not cater to his academic needs. For most athletes, if the school does not have the desired academic major, the athlete rules that school out in the “Search by Ability” or “Search by Desire” phase. However, for this specific athlete, this step came after he made his decision and attended school for one academic year. Of the interviewees who had transferred, each had a different reason for doing so. Overall, the matriculation decision can be made at any point after the final decision. This step can also include a variety of outcomes, including where a student ends up attending college and participating in athletics, transferring schools, or quitting athletics participation entirely.

Similar to Chapman’s model, students select the institution that aligns both academically, and athletically. Once at the institution, the student-athletes decision is confirmed, and they remain for subsequent years. Differing from Chapman’s model, this matriculation decision does not necessarily take place between the last semester of high school and the first semester of college. For student-athletes, the matriculation decision generally occurs after their full freshman year of college when they learn that the school or athletic program is not the right fit. The matriculation decision may not necessarily be after freshman year of college either. Some student-athletes quit athletics participation well into their time at the school. The matriculation decision can be prompted by a change in family, expectation, desire, or personal events. While the reasons for a change from the choice decision institution may vary from athlete to athlete, Clark et al. (2009) has indicated several factors which are likely to lead to a higher retention rate; incentive of scholarship did not help in the retention of collegiate athletes as much as gender or

type of sport played a role. Females and individual sport athletes were found to have a higher retention rate than males and team sport athletes. A combination of scholarship, gender, and type of sport significantly affected retention rates.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study was not without its limitations. Participants were asked to reflect on their own college selection process. For these student-athletes, that timeframe could have been years in the past and their own reflections on such experiences could be impacted by such a gap in time. Further, while student-athletes are certainly a vital piece of the college selection process, a myriad other constituency groups involved in the process were not interviewed; namely family, athletics directors, admissions counselors, financial aid representatives, and high school and club coaches. However, the present study did not interview any of the aforementioned groups. Such constituency groups could have provided different perspectives on the college choice process for prospective Division III student-athletes. Future research could work to address such gaps in the current study by collecting data from the aforementioned constituency groups.

## Conclusion

Many stages of the proposed Division III college choice model may be applicable to other factions (e.g., Division I, II, NAIA, etc.) of prospective student-athletes when taken as individual or a small set of individual factors. When taken collectively, we posit that the Division III college choice model is unique for several different reasons: (a) the varying levels of applicability of the economic, psychological, and sociological approaches; (b) potential alternate definitions of success for Division III institutions where student-athletes comprise a considerable percentage of the student body, (c) the sheer number of Division III institutions and Division III student-athletes; (d) the lack of athletics scholarships at the Division III level, and (e) Division III student-athletes serving as revenue generators for the institution in the form of tuition dollars as opposed to high-profile Division I student-athletes serving as a conduit to revenue generation.

Results from participant data allowed for the development of a Division III athletics college choice model for prospective student-athletes. The authors illustrated how such a model aligned with previous literature on the college selection process for non-athletes and Division I and II student-athletes. Further, authors outlined the uniqueness of non-athletic scholarship model of Division III athletics necessitates a college choice process that distinguishes itself from previous frameworks. The Pre-Search, Search By Ability, Search By Desire, Reality Check, Choice Decision, and Matriculation Decision stages and their respective sub-stages detail the process that the interviewed Division III student-athletes tended to go through throughout their college selection process. With a wide array of sports, institutions, and geographic regions represented in data, we believe such a model would be relevant for academics and practitioners alike. Specifically, the development of a comprehensive Division III college choice process builds on previous research while also filling a void in the literature regarding having a college choice process specifically for the NCAA Division III level. Moreover, a comprehensive college choice process for Division III athletics could be relevant for athletics directors and coaches alike as they seek to continue to better understand the array of factors involved in a prospective student-athlete deciding to matriculate at a specific institution. In doing so, this guide also works to answer Magnusen et al.'s (2014) call for more investigations to help recruiting effectiveness.

The proposed college choice guide expands Chapman's (1986) well-established model to a new realm with a very specific niche: Division III schools that may rely on student-athlete tuition dollars to meet institutional enrollment and financial goals – and thus potentially have alternate definitions of success (Katz et al., 2015). By interviewing both student-athletes and coaches about the college selection process, we can understand the relationships between prospective student-athletes' quest to continue their athletic and academic careers at a “good-fitting” institution. Simultaneously, from the coach perspective, we can understand how the prospective student-athlete “fits” into the team success and enrollment success sought by the coach, the athletic department, and the institution. While there is not a one-size-fits-all approach that perfectly encapsulates the decision-making process and the related goals of all constituency groups involved, the proposed Division III college choice framework can provide a general guide for prospective student-athletes, coaches, and administrators alike. In much the same way prospective student-athletes do not have the opportunity for paid official visits (like their Division I counterparts), Division III coaches do not have extensive recruiting budgets. Therefore, the proposed process and the specific features that detail what ultimately manifest itself in a matriculation decision could result in (1) a more economically streamlined process for prospective student-athletes and coaches and (2) a greater likelihood for a matriculated student-athlete to have a positive experience at the institution.

At the Division III level, student-athlete tuition dollars serve as a direct revenue stream for the institution. At the Division I level – particularly for higher profile sports – student-athletes are a conduit to external revenue streams (e.g., alumni donations, corporate sponsorships, ticket sales, broadcasting rights fees) but are not themselves a primary direct revenue stream (in the form of tuition dollars). In some ways, student-athletes serving directly as a revenue stream (in the form of tuition dollars) can simplify the relationship between student-athlete college choice and the recruiting process. Findings from this study indicated that coaches and prospective student-athletes were very forthcoming with one another about the non-scholarship model of Division III athletics and the impact of affordability. Although outside the primary focus of this study, the importance of tuition dollars may have an impact on alternate definitions of success (Katz et al., 2015), particularly if student-athletes are seen as a viable, appropriate form of resource acquisition (Covell et al., 2013). For student-athletes, a purely rational economic approach to college choice may not apply if the opportunity to participate in college athletics may carry a disproportionate amount of weight when economic factors would otherwise typically be weighted more. For institutions, the economic approach to recruiting may very much underlie decisions if alternate definitions of success value the importance of student-athlete tuition dollars and enrollment figures for overall institutional enrollment and tuition goals. While affordability certainly impacted the college choice process, the psychological approach and sociological approach seemingly were more relevant in some cases when considering the value placed on participating in college athletics. From the perspective of both the prospective student-athlete and those working in the athletics department, if competition for student-athlete and their tuition dollars is high and if the student-athlete experience is a core component of the student experience, understanding the college choice process is relevant for streamlining the process for prospective Division III student-athletes and recruiters alike.



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## Appendix

### *Interview Guide*

1. How does the recruiting process typically start between the coach and a prospective student-athlete?
2. What do you feel like are the biggest positives of your institution that you use to recruit?
3. What do you feel like are the biggest drawbacks of your institution that you have to overcome or address when recruiting?
4. What other types of schools do you feel like recruits are considering in addition to your school?
5. What role does cost play in recruiting student-athletes?
6. Why did you continue to pursue playing sports in college in general? Was there a conscious decision between continuing to play or not or was it a given you would continue to play?
7. At what point in your high school career did you start to seriously consider playing at the Division III level?
8. Why did you choose to play NCAA Division III athletics? Did you weigh other offers that would have come with scholarships? Why specifically did you choose this university?
9. How did the recruiting process start between you and the (school)? Did you contact the coach first or did the coach seek you out initially? Could you describe the recruiting process from first contact until when you decided to come here?
10. How much did the cost attending play into your decision?
11. Did you consider attending a large, state university such as (local large schools) and not playing sports? Why or why not?