



Student-Athlete College Choice: Division I, II, and III Football Players

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Literature connecting university selection criteria to recruiting efforts is essential for athletic administrators and coaches who seek to understand student-athlete school selection (Andrew et al., 2016). Research exploring the factors influencing National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football players' college selection process is limited. This study examines the comparison of factors across NCAA Divisions (NCAA Division I, II, and III), which has yet to be accomplished within football. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate factors that influence the college selection process of NCAA football student-athletes and to determine how the influence of college choice factors varies between all three Divisions. Participants completed a 26-item questionnaire that represented six college choice factors—Academics, Athletics, Coaching, Location, Communication Tactics, and Significant Persons. This study's findings will enhance college choice literature. Recommendations for collegiate football coaches and recruiting personnel will be discussed, and help practitioners implement effective strategies that strengthen recruiting outcomes.

Keywords: college choice, football, NCAA, recruiting, school selection

To achieve athletic success, institutions participating in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) are spending ever-increasing financial resources on new stadiums, facilities, and coaching to entice top talent into their athletic (Magnusen et al., 2014; Maxcy & Larson, 2015). In 2017, the U.S. Department of Education reported that recruiting expenses had doubled over the past decade, as institutions participating in the NCAA spent over \$282 million on recruiting efforts alone (Chard & Potwarka, 2017). The rapid rise in recruiting budgets illustrates the urgency and commitment of institutions to acquire elite athletes who will contribute to the athletic department's success.

As expectations for athletic success continue to rise, research into advancing and strengthening recruiting practices becomes paramount (Magnusen et al., 2014). Harris (2018) described the recruitment process as similar to a matching puzzle and suggested that understanding student-athlete college choice factors will likely increase recruiting effectiveness. Therefore, identifying the factors that influence a recruit's college choice will help coaches and administrators establish an effective recruiting strategy that allocates resources appropriately.

The practical value of recruiting literature has enticed scholars to identify factors that influence school selection; such factors include academics, athletics, coaching, location, communication, and significant persons (Andrew et al., 2016; Magnusen et al., 2014). Investigations of factors influencing the intercollegiate recruiting process from the student-athlete perspective have been segmented by division affiliation sport, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and financial need relative to the traditional student (i.e., non-athlete) (Andrew et al., 2016; Pauline et al., 2007; Goss et al., 2006; Letawsky, 1987). However, as time progresses and society evolves, a need emerges to validate previous research. By doing so, additional comprehension may be garnered, and gaps in previous literature may be addressed.

Utilizing the Intercollegiate Student-Athlete Recruiting Questionnaire (ISARQ), this study examines factors of student-athlete college choice for NCAA Division I, II, and III football players. Via an extensive literature review, six factors of college choice identified within this study are as follows: Academics, Athletics, Coaching, Location, Communication, and Significant Persons, with each factor associated with its related reflective variables. Comparison among NCAA divisions is also subsequently examined.

Results from this study will contribute to the growing body of college choice literature. First, the current study will strengthen understanding of recruiting factors specific to NCAA football players because football recruiting research is limited. Second, this study is paramount to football recruiting research in that it is the first to compare the influence of college choice factors across the three Divisions (NCAA Divisions I, II, and III). Finally, this study introduces the ISARQ, which measures additional items of student-athlete college choice not previously studied. Findings from this study will advance the literature and provide practitioners with a greater understanding of factors influencing college football recruits' school selection process. Coaches and administrators can incorporate recommendations from this study into their institution's recruiting strategy to influence a prospective athlete's perception of fit and ultimate school selection.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

The complexities of college choice require that multiple theoretical perspectives and conceptual models be utilized to understand best the student-athlete recruitment process's intricacies (Magnusen et al., 2014). Theories such as brand identity, relationship marketing, and person-environment fit provide the basis for understanding how student characteristics and external influences impact the student-athlete college choice process. Additionally, Chapman's (1981) *Influences on Student College Choice*, Litten's (1982) *Expanded Model of the College Selection Process*, and Magnusen et al.'s (2014) *Model of the Recruiting Process in NCAA* can be combined to provide a conceptual framework that illustrates how factors of college choice and recruiting strategy influence recruiting outcomes.

Person-environment fit theory provides bases for understanding the influential nature of a recruit's attitude and commitment toward an institution. Ostroff and Zhan (2012) defined person-environment fit as the combined consideration of an individual's characteristics and environmental characteristics. Positive fit perception is manifested by a recruit's favorable attitude toward the institution, verbal commitment to sign with the university, or official commitment to the recruiting school (Magnusen et al., 2014). Scholars have identified two subtypes of person-environment fit relevant to the recruiting and school selection process, including person-job fit and person-organization fit (Carless, 2005; Magnusen et al., 2014; Ostroff & Zhan, 2012). During the recruiting process, prospective student-athletes evaluate a variety of categories influenced by factors. The prospective student-athletes then select a university that best fits their personality, behavior, characteristics, and values, as well as their athletic ability and academic aptitude.

Chapman's (1981) model was one of the first attempts to conceptualize the college selection process and illustrates how both student characteristics (then defined as socioeconomic, aptitude, educational aspirations, and high school performance) and external factors (then defined as significant persons, fixed college characteristics, and communication efforts) influence student expectations and choice of university. Litten's (1982) model incorporates additional student characteristics (then defined as race, gender, and parental education) and elaborates on the process of college selection, which incorporates how interactions with both parents and institutions during the information gathering stage influence a student's decision to apply and enroll at a university. Chapman (1981) and Litten (1982) provided essential models for guiding future exploration into college choice; however, they share a limitation—both focus solely on the college choice process as it pertains to the traditional academic student, not a prospective student-athlete.

Magnusen et al.'s (2014) model provides a synthesis of student-athlete college choice literature and introduces a framework that captures the intercollegiate recruiting process's complexity. The model provides a more elaborate explanation of how recruiting personnel (i.e., head coach) use college choice factors, such as communication tactics, to shape student-athletes and influential agents' (e.g., parents') perceptions. The term influential agent refers to a significant person, such as a family member, friend, or high school coach, who shapes the athlete's perception of college choice factors. Thus, a successful recruiting strategy requires recruiting personnel to identify, categorize, and deliver information to address both the student-athlete and influential agent's perceived needs. Student-athletes then assess the delivered

information and develop perceptions of fit with an organization based on the congruence between college choice factors and student-athletes' perceived needs (Gabert et al., 1999).

The factors and associated items outlined in this study will increase understanding of what motivates student-athletes to select a university. Examining college choice factors will allow coaches and recruiting practitioners to establish and maintain a strategy that highlights persuasive institutional characteristics that shape fit perception. Chapman (1981) suggested that an effective recruiting strategy requires a systematic marketing approach that accounts for prospective students' needs and the institution's market position compared to competing institutions. The accurate measurement of college choice factors plays a vital role in understanding student-athletes' needs and the factors that shape their perception of fit. In addition to examining the traditional aspects of college choice, Magnusen et al. (2014) recommended that researchers explore the influence of significant persons and communication tactics as components of the student-athlete school selection process, suggesting that previous research has neglected both. The current study will more thoroughly incorporate items that will help examine significant persons' influence and communications tactics throughout the recruiting process.

Student-Athlete School Selection

The ability to maximize recruiting efforts requires frequent examination of college choice factors and associated items that influence the school selection of the specific student-athlete population being targeted during the recruiting process (Gabert et al., 1999). Gabert et al. (1999) developed the Student-Athlete College Choice Profile Survey (SACCPS) to explore college choice factors specific to student-athletes and develop college choice profiles by institutional type (NCAA Division I, II, and NAIA). The original scale represented 23 items identified through a survey of athletic department personnel from various universities and then distributed to NCAA student-athletes. Gabert et al. (1999) found that athletic-related items had a more considerable influence at the Division I level. Student-athletes identified the head coach as the most influential factor, followed by the school's location, the opportunity to play, degree program, and academic support services. The influence of athletic-related items on Division I student-athletes was later supported by Judson et al. (2004). They found the competition level to be the most valued attribute of student-athlete college choice, followed by academic reputation, relationship with coaches, and athletic facilities quality.

Goss et al. (2006) sought to explore college choice factors that student-athletes considered when choosing small colleges. A modified version of Gabert et al.'s (1999) SACCPS was distributed to entering freshman student-athletes from various NCAA Division III and NAIA private and church-affiliated institutions. Goss et al. (2006) support the previous findings of Gabert et al. (1999). They illustrated the equal importance of athletic, academic, and personal factors to student-athletes attending small colleges, specifically degree programs, the opportunity to play academic support services, and spiritual guidance. Goss et al. (2006) further expounded on hiring head coaches who are willing to explore, understand, and communicate aspects that influence school selection. The head coach plays an integral role in the college experience and significantly influences student-athletes' athletic, academic, and personal development.

Pauline et al. (2007) developed the Influential Factors Survey for Student-Athletes (IFSSA) to examine the relative importance of specific items that influence student-athlete college selection decisions and explore the differences among NCAA Division I, II, and III institutions. Pauline et al. (2007) found that athletics items were the most influential among

baseball players. However, student-athletes at the Division III level viewed academics as significantly more influential, while those in Division II viewed financial aid significantly more influential. These findings were consistent with Pauline et al. (2008), who used the IFSAA to examine the differences among Division I, II, and III softball players. Findings support the significant influence of coaching and athletic items on the university selection of Division I student-athletes.

Andrew et al. (2016) explored how college choice items differ by gender using a modified version of Gabert et al.'s (1999) SACCPS, which was distributed and completed by 255 NCAA Division I student-athletes. Student-athletes reported that academic reputation, college head coach, school location, athletic facilities, and athletic traditions influence college choice significantly. Additionally, results were consistent with prior research that academic items were more critical for female student-athletes (Doyle & Gaeth, 1990; Judson et al., 2004; Pauline, 2010). Pauline (2010) found that female athletes place a higher value on academic, social, and financial variables than male athletes among Division I, II, and III lacrosse players. Researchers suggest that male athletes place a higher value on athletic items because there are more opportunities to continue their athletic careers (Andrew et al., 2016; Pauline, 2010).

Following an extensive review of the literature and with the assistance of individuals' experience in intercollegiate football recruiting, the current study utilized the ISARQ to measure the influence of six factors of college choice—Athletics, Academics, Coaching, Location, Significant Persons, and Communication Tactics—on schools' selection of NCAA football players. Each of the six factors, otherwise known as dimensions, consists of multiple items, otherwise known as variables. Exploring these items strengthens the understanding of how college choice factors influence student-athletes' school selection decisions. The following sections present a synthesis of literature relating to the six factors and associated items discussed during this study and explore differences between NCAA Division I, II, and III football players.

College Choice Factors

Athletic. Researchers have shown that items relating to the institution's athletic characteristics have a significant role in influencing athletes' selection of a university. Judson et al. (2004) found the level of competition (i.e., NCAA Division I, II, or III) to be the most highly valued item considered by male athletes during the selection process. Sports facilities are considered essential to the college experience and are often ranked among the most significant influences on student-athlete school choice, followed by the athletic programs' tradition (Andrew et al., 2016; Chard & Potwarka, 2017; Magnusen et al., 2014). Additional athletic-related items influencing college choice include television exposure (Andrew et al., 2016), opportunity to win a championship (Huffman & Cooper, 2012), athletic equipment and apparel (Smart & Wolfe, 2000), athletic conference affiliation (Judson et al., 2004), athletic strength of schedule (Pauline, 2010), win/loss record (Chard & Potwarka, 2017; Pauline et al., 2007), and athletic event attendance (Pauline, 2010). Scholars have suggested that athletic items' influence on college choice increases when student-athletes have promising professional opportunities (Pauline, 2010). Hence, student-athletes at the Division I level, especially male athletes participating in revenue sports, exhibit more concern for an institution's athletic-related aspects during the recruiting process (Gabert et al., 1999; Pauline, 2010).

Academic. Academic-related items historically rank among the most influential characteristics of a university associated with school choice among student-athletes (Adler & Adler, 1991). The academic reputation and preferred majors' availability are among the most significant items influencing an athlete's university selection (Andrew et al., 2016; Judson et al., 2004; Pauline et al., 2008). Academic-related items discussed throughout the literature include the reputation of preferred major (Judson et al., 2004), faculty at the University (Pauline, 2010), university facilities (Pauline et al., 2008), academic support services (Gabert et al., 1999), and graduation rate of athletes (Pauline, 2010). Both male and female student-athletes have been shown to place high relative value on academics, and student-athletes tend to select universities that prepare them for opportunities after graduation (Andrew et al., 2016; Chapman, 1981). Huffman and Cooper (2012) found that the opportunity to begin a good career outside of playing professional football had the most significant impact on Division I football players' college selection, followed by the college degree's total academic value. Institutions are unlikely to increase their recruiting potential without placing a substantial effort toward establishing a proven support system for academics and demonstrating a commitment to graduating elite student-athletes (Gabert et al., 1999).

Location. The university's location (Andrew et al., 2016; Doyle & Gaeth, 1990) and proximity to family (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015) significantly influence school selection. Servier (1986, 1994) explained that university location significantly influences school selection decisions as students consider accessibility and convenience during the selection process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). For example, Ming (2010) found that students who live close to a college or university are more likely to attend higher education institutions than those who do not live near a university. Some students are specifically looking for a college or university close to their hometown, place of work, and family (Absher & Crawford, 1996). Kohn et al. (1976) explained that proximity of the institution to the prospective student's home is a critical school selection predisposition. A low-cost and nearby option was an impactful stimulant of a student's decision to continue their education or not.

Coaching. Countless studies have categorized the head coach as an athletic variable. However, this study delineates between athletic and coaching items to better understand coaching characteristics' influence on recruiting outcomes. Scholars have found that coaching often has a more significant influence on recruiting outcomes than physical resources, such as facilities and equipment, and can attract recruits to their respective programs by enhancing the institution's overall reputation (Magnusen et al., 2014; Smart & Wolfe, 2000). Prospective student-athletes and their parents consider the head coach vital to a recruit's future athletic and academic success (Adler & Adler, 1991; Andrew et al., 2016; Gabert et al., 1999; Pauline et al., 2008). Croft (2008) found that NCAA Division I men's basketball players considered their relationship with the head coach as the most significant influence in their college selection, followed by the head coach's reputation, style of play, and relationships with assistant coaches. Additional coaching items include the head coach's ability to develop players (Huffman & Cooper, 2012), the reputation of the coaching staff (Pauline, 2010), and the head coach's personality (Pauline et al., 2008).

Significant Persons. Recruiting student-athletes is a highly competitive process, which requires coaches to identify and establish relationships with influential persons, such as the

recruit's parents or siblings. Student-athletes often rely on influential persons' counsel and experiences throughout the recruiting process (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). Litten (1982) suggested that college-educated parents are often the primary source of information and guidance throughout the selection, while students without college-educated parents will most likely rely on the influence of an individual with more considerable experience, such as a school guidance counselor. Like traditional students, athletes rely on the guidance of individuals they feel are credible in this particular situation (Magnusen et al., 2014). With NCAA Division I male basketball players, Croft (2008) found that the most influential person in the college selection process was the recruit's mother, followed by father, and then the institution's head coach. An effective strategy must focus on presenting athletic, academic, and external information through communication tactics to distinguish specific university selection criteria in the eyes of recruits and influential persons (Magnusen et al., 2014).

Communication Tactics. Recruiting efforts provide an opportunity for recruiting personnel to package and communicate information to shape the prospective student-athletes and their significant person's perception of fit. Litten (1982) suggested that recruiting efforts may help reach different people when recruiting strategy incorporates various information and delivery channels. However, the influence of recruiting strategy efforts has been given minimal attention in student-athlete college choice literature. Andrew et al. (2016) suggested that enhancing a recruit's experience during their campus visit can significantly impact a prospective recruit's perception of the institution. However, research exploring the communication tactics used by practitioners throughout the recruiting process has been limited to mainly official and unofficial campus visits. It has failed to explore additional social media methods, text messages, phone calls, letters, information packets, and head coach visits (Croft, 2008). Communication tactics provide practitioners with channels to effectively communicate items associated with college choice factors, which will enhance a recruiter's ability to influence the selection process of student-athletes and make information more salient.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate factors that influence the college selection process of NCAA football student-athletes and to determine how the influence of college choice factors varies between all three Divisions. Measuring the influence of the selection criteria outlined above will have a considerable impact on the literature. It will allow researchers to provide NCAA Division I, II, and III practitioners with recommendations that will enhance recruits' experience and improve recruiting outcomes (Goss et al., 2006; Judson et al., 2004). The questionnaire developed and employed includes the items associated with the six factors of college choice—Academics, Athletics, Coaching, Location, Communication Tactics, and Significant Persons—identified by scholars and practitioners as having a considerable influence on the school selection of student-athletes and can be utilized in future research.

Methodology

Research Design

The study was designed to measure each college choice variable's influence using a 26-item scale. Participants rated each item on a nominal scale used to represent the following six factors of student-athlete college choice:

- Academic—Future Career Opportunities, Preferred Major/Minor, Academic Value, Academic Reputation, Reputation of Major
- Athletic—Tradition of Athletics, Athletic Facilities, Equipment and Apparel, Athletic Event Attendance, Win/Loss Record
- Coaching—Ability to Develop Players, Head Coach's Personality, Reputation of Head Coach, Relationship with Head Coach, Head Coach Style of Play
- Location—Proximity to Family, Location of University
- Communication Tactics—Telephone Calls, Text Messages, Campus Recruiting Visit, Letters from Coaches, Visit from Head Coach
- Significant Persons—Mother, Father, Siblings, Other Relatives

Participants

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before conducting this study. Permission was also granted to conduct the study via research agreements with university and athletic administrator support. Coaches also consented to the study and allowed their athletes to be surveyed. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select universities targeted for data collection, and a total of nine universities across all three NCAA Divisions accepted the invitation to participate. The sample consisted of freshmen sophomores, juniors, and seniors enrolled as full-time students and currently on the active football roster at their respective institutions. Student-athletes completing the survey were asked to recall their recruitment process and variable's levels of influence on their college selection process (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). A total of 229 participants completed a questionnaire consisting of 54 Division I athletes, 94 Division II athletes, and 81 Division III athletes, providing strong representation for the proposed research.

Measurement

The ISARQ, a modified version of the Student-Athlete College-Choice Profile (SACCP) questionnaire developed by Gabert et al. (1999), was used to assess the study's research questions. The original SACCP was developed and founded upon previous college choice literature and through surveying subject matter experts (Gabert et al., 1999). Also, within the original SACCP, Cronbach alpha was used for testing internal consistency and reliability (Gabert et al., 1999). For this study, similar to the methodology utilized by Huffman and Cooper (2012), researchers modified the SACCP to add additional variables that were not included within the original instrument. Similar to the development of the SACCP (Gabert et al. 1999) and the modified SACCP utilized by Huffman and Cooper (2012), the items added indicate results from surveying athletic administration practitioners and sport management faculty members regarding potential college choice factors for student-athletes. The questionnaire, including the added items, such as equipment and apparel, was examined by seven subject matter experts (SME's). Similar to Huffman and Cooper (2012), an internal consistency reliability measure was not calculated. The nature of the survey questions did not require such because each survey question measured isolated degrees of influence (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). It would not have been logical to therefore test internal consistency and reliability across items measuring different variables (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). Subsequently, researchers determined that the modified SACCP, referred to as the ISARQ, was an acceptable measurement tool.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed and collected in the middle of the academic year (February) from participating programs. Surveys were distributed to an athletics department representative at each participating institution. The representative at each institution was responsible for distributing the questionnaire to all current student-athletes participating in the football program at their institution, including describing the questionnaire, purpose of study, and consent documentation. Participants from the selected universities were invited to voluntarily complete the anonymous online questionnaire at their leisure and without obligation.

Data Analysis

Information gathered from the survey was compiled and analyzed using SPSS 20.0 computer software. Descriptive statistics were employed to account for participant demographics, including age, home state, ethnicity, and academic standing. A descriptive statistical analysis was used for the top-ranked items. Items were then computed and subsequently grouped with other associated items to represent six factors (i.e., athletic, academic, coaching, location, communication tactics, and significant persons). Descriptive analysis revealed each item's means and frequencies associated with the six factors of student-athlete college choice in ranked order based on Division. A multivariate analysis (MANOVA) was employed to compare and examine how the influence differs between Divisions.

Results

Demographics of Participants

The study participants were 229 NCAA football student-athletes who participated in teams located throughout the United States. The vast majority of respondents were from the United States (98.3%), representing 38 States. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 27, with a mean age of 20.25 ($SD = 1.56$). Of the 229 respondents, more than half (58.5%) received a partial (42.8%) or full (15.7%) athletic scholarship. In this sample, 23.6% attended NCAA Division I schools, 41% attended Division II schools, and 35.4% attended Division III schools. The majority of participants (63.8%) classified themselves as Caucasian, followed by 21.8% African American, 5.7% Pacific Islander, 3.9% Hispanic, 2.6% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 2.2% Asian or other. Athletes also reported that campus visits—both unofficial and official—ranged from zero to 20 visits, with a mean of 5.4 ($SD = 4.55$). The sample was 34.5% first-year students, 30.1% sophomores, 22.7% juniors, and 12.2% seniors.

Descriptive Analysis and Correlations of College Choice Factors

The current study's first objective was to explore the influence of college choice factors specific to NCAA football players. Participants completing the ISARQ ranked variables on a four-point Likert-type scale including the following: 1 (no influence/NONE), 2 (slight influence/LOW), 3 (moderate influence/SOME), and 4 (high influence/HIGH) (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). Descriptive analysis revealed the top ten most influential items in ranking order, including future career opportunities ($M=3.10$, $SD=1.00$), telephone calls ($M=3.01$, $SD=1.03$),

the head coach's ability to develop players ($M=3.00$, $SD=1.00$), the tradition of athletic programs ($M=2.97$, $SD=1.06$), preferred major/minor offered by the University ($M=2.95$, $SD=1.04$), the educational value of the University ($M=2.83$, $SD=0.96$), text messages ($M=2.82$, $SD=2.82$), the academic reputation of the University ($M=2.80$, $SD=0.97$), campus recruiting visit ($M=2.79$, $SD=1.08$), and athletic facilities ($M=2.80$, $SD=1.00$). The five least influential factors were letters from coaches ($M=2.45$, $SD=1.15$), visits from Head Coach ($M=2.24$, $SD=1.14$), win/loss record ($M=2.23$, $SD=1.14$), the influence of siblings ($M=1.93$, $SD=1.03$), and influence of other relatives ($M=1.72$, $SD=0.96$).

Means, standard deviations, and correlation values were subsequently analyzed and are presented in Table 1. Descriptive analysis revealed that academic-related items ($m=2.89$) had the highest mean, followed by coaching ($m=2.76$), communication tactics ($m=2.66$), location ($m=2.68$), athletics ($m=2.65$), and significant persons ($m=2.21$). The standard deviations ranged from .81 for significant persons to .88 for both location and communication tactics. It was interesting to note that coaching was rated as the second most important factor. Findings from the correlation analysis provide support for the inclusion of all items included in ISARQ.

Table 1
Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics of College Choices

	1	2	3	4	5	6	<i>m</i>	<i>sd</i>
<i>Athletics</i>	1	.146	.367	.509	.234	.352	2.65	0.82
<i>Academics</i>	.146	1	.319	.256	.267	.204	2.89	0.81
<i>Communication Tactics</i>	.367	.319	1	.499	.308	.262	2.66	0.88
<i>Coaching</i>	.509	.256	.499	1	.328	.231	2.76	0.83
<i>Significant Persons</i>	.234	.267	.308	.328	1	.250	2.21	0.81
<i>Location</i>	.352	.204	.262	.231	.250	1	2.68	0.88

Differences in Selection Criteria between NCAA Divisions

The second objective of the current study was to determine how the influence of those factors vary based on institution type (NCAA Division I, II, and III). A MANOVA was employed to analyze college choice's six factors—academic, athletic, coaching, location, financial, and personal. The Box's M value of 70.15 was associated with a p -value of .008, indicating that the covariance matrices between groups were not assumed equal. Thus, it was determined that Pillai's trace should be used. A MANOVA revealed that two factors of the survey significantly varied in influence based on the NCAA division [Pillai's Trace = 342, $F(12, 444) = 7.64$, $p < .001$]. A test of between-subjects effects was significant for athletic [$F(2, 226) = 29.806$, $p < .001$] and academic [$F(2, 226) = 6.318$, $p < .005$] factors. Further, a test of between-subject effects was non-significant for communication tactics [$F(2, 226) = .478$, $p = .621$], coaching [$F(2, 226) = 1.197$, $p = .304$], significant persons [$F(2, 226) = .123$, $p = .884$], and location [$F(2, 226) = 2.336$, $p = .099$].

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of the Extracted Factors

	Overall		Division I		Division II		Division III		ANOVA	
	<i>m</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Athletics</i>	2.65	0.82	2.87	0.72	2.96	0.65	2.15	0.81	29.806	.000
Tradition of Athletic	2.97	1.06	3.28	0.83	3.34	0.90	2.35	1.09		
Athletic Facilities	2.80	1.00	3.19	0.89	3.09	0.77	2.22	1.04		
Equipment and Apparel	2.67	0.95	2.80	0.90	2.90	0.84	2.32	1.01		
Athletic Event Attendance	2.59	1.03	2.81	1.17	2.79	0.88	2.21	1.01		
Win/Loss Record	2.23	1.14	2.28	1.11	2.69	1.15	1.67	0.89		
<i>Academics</i>	2.89	0.81	2.62	0.80	2.85	0.74	3.11	0.85	6.318	.002
Future Career Opportunities	3.10	1.00	2.85	1.05	3.09	0.91	3.30	1.04		
Preferred Major/Minor	2.95	1.04	2.61	1.02	3.06	1.02	3.05	1.04		
Academic Value	2.83	0.96	2.57	0.96	2.67	0.86	3.17	0.98		
Academic Reputation	2.80	0.97	2.59	0.96	2.57	0.89	3.21	0.94		
Reputation of Major	2.76	1.05	2.48	1.08	2.85	0.94	2.83	1.14		
<i>Communication Tactics</i>	2.66	0.88	2.56	0.97	2.68	0.75	2.70	0.95	.478	.621
Telephone Calls	3.01	1.03	2.87	1.06	3.10	0.93	3.00	1.13		
Text Messages	2.82	1.01	2.56	1.08	2.93	0.89	2.86	1.07		
Campus Recruiting Visit	2.79	1.08	2.48	1.18	2.88	0.97	2.89	1.10		
Letters from Coaches	2.45	1.15	2.50	1.22	2.40	1.00	2.47	1.27		
Visit from Head Coach	2.24	1.26	2.39	1.25	2.11	1.18	2.28	1.36		
<i>Coaching</i>	2.76	0.83	2.89	0.84	2.77	0.71	2.66	0.94	1.197	.304
Ability to Develop Players	3.00	1.00	3.20	1.00	3.09	0.92	2.78	1.06		
Head Coach's Personality	2.74	1.05	2.81	1.01	2.64	0.97	2.81	1.16		
Reputation of Head Coach	2.72	1.07	2.94	0.98	2.87	1.01	2.41	1.14		
Relationship with H.C.	2.71	1.06	2.69	1.02	2.61	1.01	2.84	1.13		
Head Coach Style of Play	2.62	1.06	2.78	1.08	2.65	0.97	2.47	1.13		
<i>Significant Persons</i>	2.21	0.81	2.17	0.80	2.23	0.81	2.22	0.84	.123	.884
Mother	2.61	1.11	2.43	1.07	2.68	1.06	2.65	1.17		
Father	2.60	1.11	2.59	1.12	2.52	1.08	2.70	1.15		
Siblings	1.93	1.03	2.06	1.14	1.90	0.97	1.86	1.01		
Other Relatives	1.72	0.96	1.59	0.92	1.83	0.95	1.67	1.00		
<i>Location</i>	2.68	0.88	2.81	0.83	2.74	0.81	2.51	0.98	2.336	.099
Proximity to Family	2.68	1.08	2.78	1.09	2.81	1.02	2.47	1.13		
Location of University	2.67	0.99	2.85	1.05	2.67	0.91	2.56	1.04		

Multiple comparisons reveal that results generated from Division III football players significantly differ from both Division I ($p < .001$) and Division II ($p < .001$) football players, while Division II players shared a more similar view of athletics with Division I ($p = 0.464$) players. The athletic factor had a more significant influence on the college selection of Division II football players ($M = 2.96$) compared to Division I football players ($M = 2.87$) and Division III football players ($M = 2.15$).

Division III football players view academic items significantly differently than both Division I ($p < .001$) and Division II ($p < .05$) players. In contrast, Division II players shared a more similar view of academics with Division I ($p = .096$) players. Academic factors had the most considerable influence on the college selection process of Division III football players ($m = 3.11$), followed by Division II ($m = 2.85$) and Division I ($m = 2.62$) football players.

The influence of communication tactics ($F = .478, p = .621$), coaching, significant persons ($F = .123, p = .884$), and location ($F = 2.336, p = .884$) did not differ significantly among the NCAA Divisions. As seen in Table 3, the five most influential items in ranking order include future career opportunities ($m = 3.10$), telephone calls from coaches ($m = 3.01$), head coach's ability to develop players ($m = 3.00$), tradition of athletic programs ($m = 2.97$), and preferred major or minor offered by the university ($m = 2.95$). The five least influential items were "letters from coaches ($m = 2.45$), visit from head coach to school or home ($m = 2.24$), win/loss record ($m = 2.23$), siblings ($m = 1.93$), and other relatives ($m = 1.72$).

Discussion

This study is unique because it explores the factors of influence on the school selection process of NCAA Division I, II, and III football players. Results from the study support previous research related to student-athlete college choice and recruiting literature, as well as reinforce the salient influence of the six factors measured using ISARQ, which includes athletics (Gabert et al., 1999), academics (Mathes & Gurney, 1985), communication tactics (Litten, 1982), coaching (Pauline et al., 2008), significant persons (Magnusen et al., 2014), and location (Andrew et al., 2016). The factors and items examined increase understanding of what motivates NCAA football players to select a particular university during the intercollegiate recruiting process.

The current study supports historical college choice literature that identifies the academic item of future career opportunities as having the most significant influence on student-athlete college choice across all three divisions, supporting previous research findings (Mathes & Gurney, 1985; Pauline et al., 2008). Further, four of the top ten items were academic-related, including future career opportunities (Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Pauline, 2010), preferred major/minor offered by the University (Goss et al., 2006), the academic value of the University (Huffman & Cooper, 2012), and the academic reputation of the University (Andrew et al., 2016). Consistent with Pauline's (2010) findings, academics had the most significant influence on Division III football players' college selection, which comes as no surprise considering the limited opportunity these athletes have to advance their playing career to the professional ranks. Items of high statistical significance were future career opportunities, followed by telephone calls from coaches and the head coach's ability to develop players. These findings support previous investigations and illustrate the impact coaches have on student-athlete college choice (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). Student-athletes tend to select universities that exhibit a strong perception of providing educational and personal experiences that best prepare them for futures outside of athletics (Andrew et al., 2016; Chapman, 1981). Huffman and Cooper (2012) suggested that recruits desire to pursue a meaningful college education and view the head coach as primarily responsible for their personal and athletic development.

In addition to supporting the outcomes of previously published investigations, the current study made several significant contributions to student-athlete college choice research. First, results from the current study suggest that coaching has a greater influence on student-athlete school selection than other historically considered athletic-related items. Therefore, the need to

explore coaching and athletics as two separate factors and should not be combined into one category of variables. In doing so, scholars and practitioners will determine which characteristics of coaching are most desired among student-athletes. For example, the current study found that the head coach's ability to develop players ranked first among the coaching items, followed by the head coach's personality, head coach's reputation, relationship with the head coach, and head coach's style of play. The influence of coaching did not differ significantly among the three NCAA divisions; however, the ranked order of items differed from previous investigations of different sports (Croft, 2008), suggesting that the influence of coaching characteristics may vary between sports.

The current study also found that coaching had the most significant influence on Division I football players' school selection, followed by athletics. This finding differs from contemporary studies of student-athlete college choice, suggesting that the influence of coaching and athletic factors vary significantly between sports at the Division I level (Pauline, 2010; Pauline et al., 2007). For example, Division I baseball players considered athletic-related items as having the most considerable impact on their school choice (Pauline et al., 2007). Academic items had the most significant influence on Division I men's lacrosse players (Pauline, 2010). The current study substantiates scholars' opinions who submit that the relative importance of athletics, coaching, and academics is influenced by heightened professional opportunities (Gabert et al., 1999; Pauline, 2010). Thus, it comes as no surprise that coaching and athletic-related items have a more substantial influence on football players participating at the highest intercollegiate level of play and have heightened opportunities for extending their careers beyond college.

The tradition of athletic programs and athletic facilities significantly influenced NCAA football players' school selection among athletic-related items. The current study initiated an exploration into the influence of equipment and apparel on student-athlete college choice. It has become common practice to implement equipment and apparel into recruiting strategy, yet previous research has neglected this element. Overall, equipment and apparel ranked third among athletic items, above athletic event attendance and win/loss record. Further, equipment and apparel ranked among the top-ten items influencing the school selection of both Divisions I and II football players.

The current study also introduces communication tactics and significant persons as two separate factors influencing student-athletes' school selection. The influence of communication tactics has been given minimal attention in previous studies on student-athlete college choice. Previous investigations have focused on the influence of official campus recruiting visits (Andrew et al., 2016) and unofficial campus recruiting visits (Goss et al., 2006) and have neglected to explore other contact methods frequently employed by recruiting practitioners throughout intercollegiate athletics. Findings from this study indicate that football players representing all three NCAA Divisions consider communication tactics to have a similar level of influence on their school selection. Surprisingly, coaches' telephone calls were identified as the most important communication tactic, followed by text messages from coaches, official campus recruiting visits, and coaches' letters.

Recruiting student-athletes is a highly competitive process that requires practitioners to identify and establish relationships with individuals outside the university that impact a recruit's school selection. Similar to communication tactics, exploring the impact of significant persons on student-athlete college choice is limited. Results from the current study suggest that recruits rely on the counsel and experiences of influential persons, such as parents, siblings, and other relatives, throughout the recruiting process (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). Findings indicate that

parents have the greatest impact on a recruit's school selection outside of the coaching staff and support implementing recruiting strategies that influence both the student-athlete and their parents.

Recommendations for NCAA Recruiting Practitioners

A fundamental implication of this research is to provide athletic administrators, coaches, recruiters, athletic personnel, and university officials a basis for understanding the most salient factors that influence the school selection decisions of recruits across NCAA Division I, II, and III institutions. Recruiting plays a crucial role in the success of an intercollegiate athletic program. High revenue athletic programs have a substantial advantage. They can excessively spend funds to enhance the recruiting experience for potential student-athletes as they see fit, while institutions with more restrictive budgets struggle to keep up. Understanding the various elements of the intercollegiate recruiting process will help practitioners establish and maintain a strategy that will maximize financial resources and positively affect student-athletes' school selection decisions.

This study's primary findings provide a basis for which university personnel can develop an effective and financially efficient recruitment plan that utilizes college choice factors to shape both the recruit and significant person's perception of fit. The results of this study highlight the salient factors practitioners should focus on when attempting to influence prospective student-athletes' school selection and reiterate the need for a balanced recruiting strategy that emphasizes the university's academic strengths and athletic resources. This study also emphasizes the importance of practitioners identifying the academic and personal aspirations of the prospective athlete. Highlighting how the university will best prepare student-athletes for life after college continues to be useful across all three NCAA divisions. Recruiting practitioners should continue to focus messaging on student-athletes' academic, athletic, and personal development opportunities.

Also, coaches and recruiting practitioners must embrace significant persons' influential nature and implement strategies that shape those influential individuals' perceptions. Practitioners would benefit from identifying significant persons and working towards developing an interpersonal relationship with them. Coaches should continue to seek to develop a relationship with both the student-athlete and significant persons through interpersonal recruiting methods. Communication tactics such as frequent phone calls from coaches provide recruiting practitioners with opportunities to strengthen interpersonal relationships, identify and address concerns, and strengthen a recruit's confidence in the institution's ability to provide them with the best opportunity to succeed. Findings support the need for future research to strengthen understanding of the intercollegiate recruiting process and the associated factors that influence a recruit's perception of fit and university selection.

Limitations

First, the participants only represent NCAA Divisions I, II, and III football players and are not generalizable to football programs associated with an athletic association outside the NCAA or across other sports. Second, there was a disparity in the number of responses from each Division. Only 27% of respondents represented a Division I institution, which skews general findings toward Division II and III responses. A third limitation was the discrepancy

between the ethnicities participating in the study, as over 85% of respondents classified themselves as either Caucasian (63.8%) or African American (21.8%). Another limitation was the inclusion of upperclassmen who were asked to recall the influence of college choice factors several years removed from the recruiting process. Although researchers assume that responses were truthful and accurately represented the participants' recruiting experience, perceptions may have changed over time. A final limitation was the disparity between scholarship statuses, as nearly 85% of participants were not the recipient of a full athletic scholarship, which may have skewed the influence of financial factors. Despite the few limitations, this study offers significant contributions to college choice literature through proposing a unique six-factor college choice model, conducting an exploratory factor analysis of college choice factors with a myriad of historically underrepresented items within each factor, highlighting an abundance of future research opportunities, and providing an instrument for future college choice studies.

Recommendations for Future Research

The first recommendation for future research is to enlarge the scope of participation. Inclusion of a larger sample of Division I football players representing various institutions and conferences throughout the nation is recommended. Once accomplished, demographic information, including ethnicity, scholarship status, family structure, and religious affiliation, could prove beneficial. Future investigations could also compare student-athletes' responses based on roster size or between and within athletic conferences. A second recommendation is to investigate the differences between Division I football players and student-athletes participating in non-revenue sports, such as track and field. A third recommendation would be to consider the influence that the college choice factors have on student-athlete retention and program commitment.

Another recommendation would be to survey the parents of student-athletes and explore the differences in the perceived influence of college choice factors between student-athletes and significant persons. Furthermore, additional exploration of college choice factors based on demographic information (i.e., marital status, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity) of the players' influential agents (i.e., parents) could prove beneficial to college choice literature. Additional influential agents that must be more comprehensively investigated are the assistant and position coaches. These individuals often have the most contact with the player and often cultivate strong relationships. Therefore, it is recommended to explore further the influence of assistant coaches on the recruiting process. The tenure of assistant coaches should be among the possible items explored in the future. Having a deeper understanding of assistant coaches' influential nature throughout the recruiting process may support the need for additional allocated resources to maintain a more robust and long-lasting coaching staff.

The final recommendation is to investigate the influence of items that are not directly associated with the six factors of college choice, such as financial and personal variables that impact college choice. Previous investigations have found the amount of scholarship (Chard & Potwarka, 2017), cost of attendance (Huffman & Cooper, 2012), and opportunities for additional financial aid (Pauline, 2010) to impact an athlete's school selection, and therefore should be further investigated to understand their association with the six factors of college choice. Similarly, scholars have also identified social aspects that contribute to student-athlete college choices, such as the size of the university (Goss et al., 2006), university housing accommodations (Pauline, 2010), social life (Andrew et al., 2016), and religious affiliation (Goss

et al., 2006). Future studies that explore the above items through a factor analysis may also prove extremely beneficial to college choice literature, impacting student-athletes' recruitment processes.

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