Winning the Recruiting Game: The Student-Athlete Perspective

by

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ABSTRACT

College sports in America represent a multibillion dollar industry. Recruiting collegiate student-athletes not only is costly for university teams, but is integral for their long-term success. Universities spend substantial amounts of money to recruit student-athletes, yet relatively little academic work has focused on understanding the athletic recruiting process. While NCAA policy regulates when communication is allowed between coaches and student-athletes, there is a lack of literature investigating what the communicative aspects of athletic recruiting entail. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to unpack the student-athlete experience of collegiate athletic recruitment. It builds on theoretical work from organizational and interpersonal communication, as well as management and marketing, to extend existing knowledge of student-athletes' college choice. Specifically, a conceptual model is presented that includes how student-athletes' expectations and relationships during athletic recruitment contribute to an overall affinity for the university that, in turn, influences choice.

Thirty Division I student-athletes from six different sports participated in focus groups to discuss their recruitment experiences. Taking a grounded theory approach to the focus group transcripts, thematic analysis illuminated what was most memorable for student-athletes about their recruitment, what expectations they had for the process, and what relational benefits they sought when making their college choice decision. Findings reinforced the prominence of communication in the recruitment process, and indicated the importance of interpersonal relationships, authentic communication, and a customized recruiting experience. This work represents the start of a scholarly trajectory which will

further conceptualize and test the relational elements of athletic recruiting. Future directions, as well as theoretical and practical implications, are discussed.

DEDICATION

For Eugene, Bobbie, David, and Dena Posteher.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Arizona State University President Michael Crow characterized intercollegiate athletics as the "front porch" of the university (Lockman, 2010). Dr. Crow's use of this specific metaphor not only indicates the extreme visibility and curb appeal that a college sports team can offer a university, but also explains an underlying motivation to fund athletic programs. A winning sports organization not only has the potential to generate substantial revenue, but also offers the school a shiny promotional piece to use in advertising to prospective students (Suggs, 2003). A money-making sports infrastructure benefits the university in marketability and can even provide financial influx to university academic programs (Suggs, 2003). Further, donor and alumni contributions grow exponentially with increases in overall athletic team winning percentages (Grimes & Chressanthis, 1994; Baade & Sundberg, 1996).

The college sports industry represents a multibillion dollar industry (Krishner, 2018). Yet from a university perspective, recruiting athletes to join these teams can be very expensive. For instance, the University of Georgia spent over $600,000 on athletic recruiting for the 2011-2012 class alone (Ching, 2013). Indeed, the cost of recruiting top prospects often exceeds the cost of recruiting the rest of the university's entire freshman class (Knight Foundation, 1993). These costs to locate and woo top talent, while considerable, are understandable given the tremendous pressure that athletic coaches are under to produce winning teams. Athletic recruiting has been referred to as the "lifeblood of the American collegiate athletic system" (Belotti & Ley, 2011) – an apt moniker given

that success in athletic departments is quantified almost entirely by wins and losses (Langelett, 2003).

Around 8 million student-athletes currently participate in high school sports (NCAA, 2017). Of that 8 million, about 480,000 will progress to play at some level within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Only one percent of those high school athletes will progress to the most elite level of college sports, Division I (NCAA, 2017). Thus, collegiate athletic recruitment takes place in a highly competitive atmosphere, often fostering intense recruitment tactics. Take, for instance, University of Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh, who has been known to maximize his time allotted for in-home visits with recruits by scheduling his arrival for 12:01a.m. (the very first minute that NCAA policy allows). On these overnight visits, he has reportedly watched movies and slept over with the recruit's family (Trahan, 2016).

Considering the money involved and the high-stakes pressure to win in college sports, athletic recruiting of course has its share of scandal. For instance, a former Adidas executive and two other business associates were sentenced prison in 2019 for paying families to coerce athletes to join specific teams (Neumeister, 2019). In this case, a top recruit's father testified that he was to be paid $100,000 if his son were to play basketball at Louisville. At the time of this dissertation, other coaches at schools such as Southern California, Arizona, and Oklahoma State are currently awaiting sentencing for illegal recruiting behavior (Neumeister, 2019).

With the intensification of recruiting, the signing of high school athletes to college teams has grown to be somewhat of a media spectacle. Television channels like ESPN now provide around-the-clock coverage of National Letter of Intent signing day

for high school athletes, even offering interactive social media content to engage fans in real-time. In reality, athletic recruiting only continues to escalate in importance and in public following.

Important Terminology

Before proceeding with the literature review, it is important to discuss the fundamentals of collegiate athletic recruiting, as well as to introduce some terminology. Throughout the dissertation, the author uses the terms *student-athlete* and *recruit* to describe the young athlete being recruited by a college team. While schools with large athletic budgets may have a designated recruiting coach that oversees the recruitment process, for simplicity, this dissertation uses either the term *coach* or *recruiter* to describe the individual who is primarily in charge of recruiting the student-athletes to play a sport at their school. The governing body that oversees the highest level of collegiate athletic competition is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which is comprised of three divisions of competition, Division I, Division II, and Division III. Division I represents the most elite level of competition, which manifests in its schools having the largest athletics budgets and the greatest number of scholarships available for recruiting athletes. Division II emphasizes a balance between academics and athletics, resulting in fewer financial resources allocated for supporting athletics program costs. Division III prioritizes academic performance over athletic, and thus its schools do not offer athletic scholarships. This dissertation focuses on Division I athletic recruiting, as such schools have the largest recruiting costs and budgets, and the student-athletes being recruited are of the highest caliber. The next section explains the fundamentals of how collegiate athletic recruiting is regulated by the NCAA.

Recruitment Process

Communication is at the core of NCAA recruiting policy. The NCAA's emphasis on monitoring the timing and nature of communication indicates the important role and powerful influence that the administrative body believes communication plays in recruiting for college sports. The NCAA establishes guidelines and calendars for various stages of recruiting to ensure competitive fairness. For instance, there are predetermined periods of time where college coaches may have face-to-face communication with a recruit or their parents, when coaches can watch the athlete compete in tournaments or practices, and when the two parties may communicate on the phone (NCAA, 2014). Working within these calendar constraints, however, Division I coaches find ways to express early interest in younger and younger athletes each year (Yen, 2011). As just one example, women's soccer player Olivia Moultrie verbally committed to the University of North Carolina at age 11. While not a binding contract at that age, it ultimately led to her receiving and accepting a full scholarship to the school, amounting to nearly $300,000 (Coleman, 2019).

As of the first day of a student-athlete's senior year in high school, they may take up to five official visits to schools that express strong interest in offering them an athletic scholarship. On official visits, recruits spend 48 hours on campus on a trip fully financed by the university (Lawrence, Kaburakis, & Merck, 2008). Recruiting trips are used by both the student-athletes and the coaches to further get to know one another. An official visit affords an opportunity for the recruit to be fully immersed in the athletic, academic, and social aspects of university life at a specific institution.

After schools finish evaluating recruits and decide to whom they will offer scholarships, student-athletes who have multiple offers make an initial choice and verbally commit to their chosen school (Bigsby, Ohlmann, & Zhao, 2017). Verbal commitments are not binding for either the student-athlete or the institution, and may be extended to a student-athlete of any age. Finally, during the NCAA designated signing period, the student-athlete signs an official National Letter of Intent, committing to attend that school for a minimum of one academic school year. The agreement states that if the student-athlete remains eligible under NCAA rules, the school will provide financial aid for one academic year. Signing a National Letter of Intent terminates the recruiting process, as other schools are no longer permitted to recruit the signed student-athlete. If the student-athlete decides to attend a different school after signing a National Letter of Intent, they may request a release from their contract, but will forfeit a full year of athletic eligibility. Meaning, the student-athlete must complete a full academic year at the new school before they are eligible again to compete in an NCAA sport (NCAA, 2019).

Positionality: A Former Student-Athlete

I feel it is important to situate my personal experience with athletic recruiting at the start of this dissertation. I am a former four-year Division I student-athlete, and was heavily recruited throughout high school for volleyball. In this dissertation there are small asides like the one below. These reflections offer my personal account of my own recruiting experience, which are included to facilitate understanding of the other experiences voiced in this piece.

I was standing in the middle of the quad when I realized I had made my college choice. Interestingly, months before standing there, I had sorted every last

piece of this school's recruiting mail into the box marked "no." I had only stopped by to visit because I was already in the area on a recruiting trip to a nearby university with a more competitive volleyball program. Based on my preliminary decision filters, this one had not made the cut. But here I was, not only reconsidering it, but deciding it was the school for me.

The nearby competing school did, on paper, an excellent job selling their school to me. They had already extended a scholarship offer, and so the trip had been filled with talk about what marvelous athletic apparel I would get, the exciting places we would travel to as a team, how nice the training facilities were. Current members of the team had been welcoming and did a great job promoting the excellent coaching staff, telling me how successful we would be that coming year. When I ultimately rejected their scholarship offer, I could tell the coach was shocked.

What that coach does not know is that there was a pivotal moment when he lost me. It had nothing to do with their athletic competitiveness or how much free stuff they had. While on a visit, the coach had arranged for me and my parents to meet with the team's academic support staff. We were discussing academic trajectories, and I shared that I was interested in the honors program and wanted to do well in school. Without fully processing my statement, the academic coordinator reached over toward me and my mom and suggested I didn't need to worry, that they would make sure I got through college… as if to placate my concerns. In that moment, it was alarmingly clear that athletics completely

outweighed academics at that university. With such an imbalance, I worried that my academic pursuits may not be possible.

Even more concerning was that I felt my academic values should have mattered to the coach who had been recruiting me for years. In coordinating my visit, the coach should have considered who I was – not only as an athlete, but as a unique person. If he had truly known me, he would have anticipated the sort of college experience I was seeking. They dropped the ball, and it led me to a different college choice.

While at the time I was not able to articulate precisely what led to my college choice, I found myself often referring to it as feeling *attached* to the school. It was not until later when attending business school that I understood how individuals can become attached to companies and even brands – just as I had been attached to the school I chose. Ultimately, my desire to better understand the persuasive aspects of the recruiting process, and how student-athletes' expectations may or may not be met during recruiting (such as in my own experience), led me to this dissertation topic.

I take an interdisciplinary approach to examining the athletic recruiting process from the perspective of the student-athletes. This dissertation theoretically frames the recruiting process using organizational socialization. Messages the student-athletes receive during recruitment are designed to be persuasive in that they intend to shape, reinforce, or change a response (Miller, 1980) – specifically, the student-athletes' decision-making processes. From this perspective, college choice is the culmination of a potentially years-long process that leads to the student-athlete's decision.

The purpose of this dissertation is to unpack the student-athlete experience of collegiate athletic recruitment. The literature review first describes the theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation, and then presents a conceptual model of student-athlete college choice. The model indicates that student-athletes' expectations and relationships during athletic recruitment contribute to an overall affinity. It should be noted that I am not claiming that student-athletes' affinity toward a university in any way ends with the decision to attend a school. Rather, student-athlete affinity is likely shaped throughout the duration of their collegiate career, and may continue to evolve or devolve long after they depart and become alumni. For the scope of this dissertation, however, student-athlete affinity will only be discussed with regard to recruiting and college choice. This parameter is intentional in that I seek to first understand the relationships and experiences which occur in *advance* of the student-athlete joining the athletic organization, prior to investigating subsequent interactions between the school and the student-athlete *after* they make their choice to join the organization. Thus, this dissertation is the foundational piece in a future line of work which will further identify and test the relational elements of student-athlete affinity.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Collegiate athletic recruiting is fundamentally a set of communication encounters. The process involves years of relationship-building between athletic organizations and prospective student-athletes. Further, it entails persuasive communication (Treadway et al., 2014). Communication flows multi-directionally, with the student-athletes working to attract the attention of schools, and coaches attempting to entice desired athletic prospects. Thus, it is not only appropriate, but necessary that scholars take a communicative approach to investigate athletic recruitment.

This literature review first examines student-athlete recruitment using the theoretical frame of organizational socialization. This section contextualizes the ways in which athletic recruiting mirrors the process of attracting and onboarding new talent within an organization. Second, it explores the construct of *uncertainty* – both in the organizational and interpersonal contexts – as it relates to a student-athlete joining a team. Third, the literature review details previous research done on college-choice decision processes. This section first discusses studies which examined nonathlete undergraduate student college choice. This is relevant as of student-athletes' college choice parallels that of the general population's. The section then examines the handful of studies that explored student-athlete college selection. The literature review concludes with a conceptualization of student-athlete affinity and a proposed model of student-athlete college choice.

Recruiting as Organizational Socialization

Athletic recruiting can be examined through the lens of organizational socialization. Organizational socialization is a time period where newcomers develop the necessary skills, attitudes, and behaviors for their new role in an organization (Van Maanen & Shein, 1979). Socialization theory has been contextualized as an *interactional process* during which individuals seek information to reduce and resolve uncertainties, and to better understand the organizational culture (O'Keefe & Delia, 1985). This dissertation engages the stage model of organizational socialization (Jablin, 1982). In the model, there exist three distinct phases through which a newcomer becomes acquainted with and immersed in an organization. During the *anticipatory* stage, the employee develops expectations of what it would be like to join the organization (Jablin, 1982). For a young athlete, this would be envisioning what it would be like to be a member of a specific collegiate team – often based on information gleaned from interactions with the university or coach. During the *encounter* stage, the employee becomes acquainted with their role in the organization through information-seeking (Jablin, 1982). Within athletic recruitment, the official visit could represent such an encounter, affording the athlete an opportunity to embed themselves within the team's culture and learn more about what their role would be if join that team. Lastly, the *metamorphosis* stage is when an employee transitions into somewhat of a maintenance status, where their initial uncertainty has been managed, and they are more familiar and comfortable with their job (Jablin, 1982). Theoretically, this would be the time after the student-athlete becomes an active member of the team.

As socialization is particularly evident during periods of change – such as a student-athlete's transition from high school to college – organizational scholars have

focused considerable inquiry on the process of members entering an organization and going through employee onboarding (Louis, 1980). Research has investigated when transitions into new organizations are successful at bolstering long-term organizational commitment – as well as when they are not, leading to employee turnover (Allen, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). The prevailing organizational communication literature has offered insight into the ways in which newcomers seek information. Yet other aspects of socialization, such as the anticipatory phase (the focus of the present study) have received much less attention and leave ample room for exploration (Fetherson, 2017).

Athletes and anticipatory socialization. Anticipatory socialization is the stage where newcomers create expectations for what it would be like to join the organization (Jablin, 1982); for example, their anticipated job role. Anticipatory socialization for a student-athlete would be when they create expectations for their collegiate athletic experience, such as if they envision themselves in a starting position their freshman year or how their academic and social lives may be balanced. For the most part, sports scholars have focused on anticipatory socialization in the context of youth sports. Specifically, they have investigated the ways in which families shape expectations for future participation in sport, such as parental modeling (Marx, et al., 2008). Recently, however, Cranmer and Meyers (2016) extended anticipatory socialization to Division I student-athletes. The authors asked current student-athletes about the memorable messages they received prior to starting their college careers. They found two primary types of messages: ones that emphasize what traits make a successful athlete, and those regarding the experience of college sports in general.

Cranmer and Meyers's (2016) work on student-athlete socialization demonstrates that during anticipatory socialization student-athletes indeed receive messages that offer influential and lasting information. In addition to messages during socialization being influential, information-seeking behavior during socialization can predict positive outcomes for new employees (Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Further, studies on the marketing of higher education suggest that effective communication is inherent to the success of recruiting undergraduate students to college (Paulsen, 1990). Taken together, these findings suggest that the communicative elements of the recruiting process are indeed influential for student-athletes.

Identifying with Organizations

Organizational identification has been defined in several ways, with some scholars conceptualizing it a "cognitive link" between an individual's self-concept and organizational identity (e.g., Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1993, p. 239). Others, like Aronson (1992), depict identification as a "response to social influence," triggered by one's desire to mirror the influencer (p. 34). This dissertation draws on the definition forwarded by Mael and Ashforth (1992) that is based upon social identity theory. Social identity theory describes how self-concept is comprised of both personal and social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Tajfel's description of identification requires two parts – a cognitive and an evaluative sense of awareness or connection (1983, p. 2). Individuals identify and classify themselves in accordance with social groups, and in doing so they experience feelings of belongingness. Under this light, organizational identification is a distinct form of social identification wherein individuals define themselves in relation (or

opposition) to membership with an organization and experience a "perception of oneness or belongness" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Mael and Ashforth (1992) denoted organizational antecedents to identification, all of which relate to the context of athletic recruiting. First, they pointed to the distinctiveness of the organization's values, as opposed to others in comparison (Oakes & Turner, 1986). Comparison with others is what makes a specific organization appear special and be salient. When a student-athlete chooses between multiple colleges, salience may influence their decision process. For example, if he/she recently took an official visit and most clearly recalls the benefits of that school (e.g., availability of desired major), in comparison to earlier ones. Second, the institution's (and/or team's) prestige represents can be an element that facilitates identification with an organization in attempt to bolster an individual's self-esteem (March & Simon, 1958). In the athletic recruiting context, a high school athletes who receive interest from multiple college teams certainly may use their connections to the colleges to boost their self-image. The third organizational antecedent to identification is competition between the institution and contemporaries (Brown & Ross, 1982). The final antecedent to identification is organizational competition, which serves to create boundary lines and highlight differences in the specific organization and others like it. Such distinction is created during athletic recruitment when student-athletes evaluate the advantages of each university as they make their decision. An important element in forming an identification with an institution is finding the right fit – this becomes critical not only for individuals but the institutions as well.

Finding the Right Fit

Just as is the case for all organizations, the ability to recruit top-tier talent is integral to long-term success (Magnusen, Mondello, Kim, & Ferris, 2011). Attracting desired prospects, however, involves much more than spending money to entice highly-rated athletes – it is about finding the right fit for the team and university (Magnusen, Mondello, Kim, & Ferris, 2011). In order to effectively recruit, athletic organizations and their coaches need to not only distinguish what attracts prospects to their school, but also use the recruiting process to foster the student-athlete's feeling of belonging and fit with the university.

While extensive work in the organizational literature has investigated employee recruitment, several reviews have suggested that recruitment scholars are still missing critical pieces in understanding how organizations recruit employees (e.g., Wanous, 1992; Breaugh & Starke, 2000). In the context of athletic recruitment, the same is true, but to an even greater extent. While is important for universities to understand how student-athletes make their college choice decisions, limited scholarship is focused on understating student-athlete decision selection criteria. In large part, existing data made demographic comparisons between athletes and non-athletes (e.g., Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003) or between male and female student-athlete (e.g., Pauline, 2010). Aside from a dissertation by Magnusen (2011), little research exits that studies the communication between the recruits and the schools recruiting them, or how the process influences student-athletes' feelings toward the university.

Heavily recruited student-athletes interact with hundreds of coaches during their recruitment (Rank by Offers, 2017). Not only is the college decision a monumental choice that shapes the future of the student-athlete, but recruiting is the lifeblood of a

college coach's profession (Crabtree, 2017). Thus, it appears the complex relationship processes that lead to finding the right fit for the student-athlete and the university represent an area rich for academic exploration. This process happens within the context of organizational socialization and via communication. To begin to understand these complexities, the first research question was broad and open-ended, asking what student-athletes remembered most about their athletic recruitment.

RQ_1: What is memorable to student-athletes about the recruiting process?

Uncertainty in Organizational Socialization

As newcomers transition into new organizations, they frequently experience increased levels of uncertainty (Van Maanen, 1975). These uncertainties evolve from new expectations and relationships that the individual has not previously encountered (Katz, 1980). Jones (1986) suggested that proper socialization is a means by which the organization can help reduce uncertainty during the entry process. Indeed, information that organizational sources provide during a newcomer's assimilation can assist the individuals in coping with uncertainty (Van Maanen, 1975). Specifically, messages that are designed to clarify roles, integrate newcomers with organizational practices, and help them learn their new role have been found effective in reducing uncertainty (Jablin, 1987).

During the athletic recruitment process, student-athletes both receive and seek information to aid in their decision-making. Miller and Jablin's (1991) specify several potential sources of information: (a) official, downward communication (b) members of the newcomer's immediate network (c) other organizational members, (d) extra-organizational sources, and (e) the position itself. In the workplace, coworkers and

supervisors are the primary sources of information (Miller & Jablin, 1991). During athletic recruitment, it is the coaches and team members who primarily inform recruits about their potential new role with the team. The following section explores uncertainty in, first, the organizational and then the interpersonal context.

Newcomer information-seeking. Newcomers are often proactive in their efforts to reduce uncertainty. In most cases, with heightened uncertainty comes an increase in information-seeking behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Information exchange is inherent to the process of entering an organization and has been studied across several disciplines (see Case & Given, 2016, for review). These studies have highlighted elements of both passive and active information-seeking. During socialization, organizations offer information to potential members prior to them joining (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Foundational work in this area looked at the organizational perspective, positioning newcomers as passive recipients of information. More recently, individuals have been viewed as active agents in the information exchange process, strategically seeking information that guides them in their transition (Morrison, 1993). In athletic recruiting, student-athletes seek information about their new role as a collegiate student-athlete from potential universities, and coaches offer recruiting materials to attract student-athletes to consider their schools. Thus, the transactional nature of organizational socialization fits well with the context of athletic recruiting.

Uncertainty and social costs. When an individual leaves a prior work identity and transitions to a new workplace, uncertainty plays a major role in their interactions (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Newcomers must decipher the formal and informal expectations that come with their new role (Katz & Kahn, 1978), as well as determine their fit within a

new social system (Jablin, 1987; Van Maanen, 1975). Such role uncertainty is inherently relevant to high school students matriculating to college and higher levels of athletic competition. While uncertainty as a construct has been examined in non-newcomer contexts for organizational information-seeking, Morrison (2002) commented that the study of the relationship between uncertainty reduction and information-seeking behavior has been limited. The current study responds to this call by examining uncertainty reduction and information-seeking behaviors in a new and applied context.

There are social costs that come with newcomer information-seeking, as communication itself involves social exchange costs (Berger & Bradac, 1982). For instance, in exchange for the reward of increased information, the newcomer may encounter social rejection rather than social approval (Roloff, 1981). Research has demonstrated that newcomers are often highly concerned with the potential negative consequences of observable information-seeking (Nord, 1980). When applied to the context of athletic recruitment, a high school student-athlete may indeed experience feelings of uncertainty about how, and from whom, to seek information they require for making their college choice decision.

Relational Uncertainty

The construct of uncertainty extends to the interpersonal relationships between coaches and student-athletes as well. Berger and Calabrese (1975) presented an information theory-based understanding of uncertainty, describing uncertainty as a result of having several alternative options that may happen at a given point in time. They claimed that as one's ability to predict the likelihood of alternatives decreases, their level of uncertainty elevates. In other words, the more alternatives, the greater the uncertainty

(Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). Because the athletic recruitment process entails multiple ongoing interpersonal relationships where the student-athlete seeks information from members of the organization, it is logical to examine these relationships within the context of uncertainty reduction. Research suggests that "uncertainty reduction is critical to the conduct of interpersonal encounters" (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991, p. 32) and that uncertainty may be reduced (or increased) through verbal and nonverbal interactions over time (Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988).

Athletic recruiting indeed involves interpersonal relationships, as the student-athlete and coach may be in contact throughout the student-athlete's time in high school. While originally advanced to investigate initial interactions between strangers (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), the theory has been applied in areas such as organizational communication (e.g., Kramer, 1999). Thus, there is potential to apply the theory to the relationship between coach and student-athlete during recruitment.

Uncertainty is an important aspect of initial dyadic interactions because it frames expectations, such as the expectations each party has when going on a first date (e.g., Mongeau & Carey, 1996). Uncertainty can shape how individuals set goals of interaction, which thereby influence if they wish to continue the relationship (e.g., Mongeau, Jacobsen, & Donnerstein, 2007). Importantly, uncertainty can also influence long term relationships through relational uncertainty (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). Solomon and Knobloch (2001, 2004) depicted uncertainty as an experienced turmoil that occurs when relationships are in flux. The uncertainty relates to one's degree of confidence, or lack thereof, in the nature of the relationship (Knobloch, 2010).

Within relational uncertainty, there are three elements. While *self-uncertainty* questions the individual's own uncertainty in their relational investment, *partner uncertainty* involves an unsureness of their partner's role in the relationship. *Relationship uncertainty* involves an ambiguity about the nature of the relationship itself (Knobloch, 2010). In the context of athletic recruiting, student-athletes may experience self-uncertainty if they are unsure how vested they are in a specific coach or school. They might experience partner uncertainty if they do not have confidence in how a coach feels about their talent or ability to play in college. And, relationship uncertainty may occur if the student-athletes feel uncertain of the state of their relationship with the coach recruiting them.

Uncertainty reduction has the ability to bolster or hinder relationships. For example, reducing uncertainty may lead individuals to feel more connected to one another, thereby enhancing the relationship (Knobloch, 2010). However, reducing uncertainty may also lead to exposed negativities, which may trigger an end of the relationship (Knobloch, 2010).

These principles can be applied to the context of athletic recruiting, and the relationship between the coach and student-athlete. If a coach reduces a student-athlete's uncertainty by providing more information about the school, the exchange has the potential to either be positive or negative, depending on how the student-athlete perceives the information. Take my aforementioned personal experience regarding academic rigor as an example of how a particular disclosure during the recruiting process reduced uncertainty and led to a negative impression. I learned something that while perhaps

accurately represented the program's values and beliefs, ultimately led to my rejecting the school due to lack of fit.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) suggested that uncertainty is inherent to interpersonal relationships, and that upon entering a relationship, individuals work to reduce uncertainty by getting to know one another. There are three primary contexts where individuals are likely to be motivated to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Bradac, 1977). The first is that the person offers some sort of relational value (such as a college coach who has the power to offer a college scholarship). The second is that the person deviates from social norms and is therefore interesting (such a coach who finds a unique way to express interest in a student-athlete's ability, just as Jim Harbaugh does with his overnight visits). The third is that the individual anticipates future interaction (such as a potential collegiate coach for whom a student-athlete may commit to for four to five years).

Building on this notion of uncertainty, Sunnafrank (1986) contended that the driving force behind interpersonal interactions is outcome maximization. He argued that upon initial interaction, individuals assess what social value there may be for continuing to invest in the relationship. Therefore, at first meeting, the focus of reducing uncertainties is to be able to make predicted outcome judgments (Sunnafrank, 1986). In other words, the individual elects to either foster the relationship or disengage, based on initial assessment of the costs and rewards of doing so. In the context of athletic recruitment, when a coach contacts a student-athlete, the student-athlete is likely to work to reduce uncertainties that are specifically relevant to learning if the coach/team/university has potential value to them (e.g., do they have a scholarship

available for their year/position). Thus, the notion of outcome maximization may be particularly relevant to the context of athletic recruiting, with student-athletes determining if to continue a relationship with a recruiting coach/team/university.

Expectancies

When considering interactions between coaches and student-athletes, it is important to consider what each party expects from the encounter. Expectancies serve as framing devices that shape interpersonal interactions (Burgoon, 1993, p, 32). In other words, individuals make plans for communication based on the type of encounter and style of communication that they anticipate. Burgoon's work on expectancy violation theory (EVT) is founded on the notion of uncertainty, and how uncertainties lead individuals to generate expectations for what they either predict or prescribe *should* occur (for the most complete account of the theory, see Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Burgoon described the construct of expectancy as an "enduring pattern of anticipated behavior" (1993, p. 31). She forwarded three factors which drive expectancies: characteristics of the communicator, relationship, and context. Communicator characteristics include features of the individuals in the relationship (e.g., the coach doing the recruiting). Relationship factors involve characteristics of the relationship such as liking, attraction, and familiarity (e.g., how close the student-athlete feels to the coach). Context characteristics involve the situation itself and how the environment may come with prescribed expectations for behavior (e.g., if in a formal context of an official visit or an informal context of a quick conversation after a tournament game).

While expectancy violation theory originated as a theory of nonverbal communication, it grew to include work on both verbal and nonverbal interactions,

examining how individuals react when communicative expectancies are violated (e.g., Floyd, 1999). Burgoon (1993) described expectancies that can occur in reference to what one anticipates occurring (predictive expectancies), and what is desired or preferred (prescriptive expectancies). In EVT, *communicator reward value* is how one evaluates the individual who committed a violation of expectations. The communicator's reward value affects how the violation is perceived. When someone violates expectations, in order to reconcile the occurrence, individuals work to determine the meaning of the behavior. In these moments, the evaluation of the violation and the corresponding positive or negative feelings associated with the violation are considered *violation valence*. EVT predicts that if a violation is evaluated as negative, it will generate negative interaction outcomes – more so than meeting expectations. Similarly, a violation with positive valence will generate more positive interactions than a non-violation. For example, if a coach that was appealing to a recruit sent them an abundance of information, that would be evaluated more positively than if the student-athlete were to receive an abundance of information from a coach at an unappealing school. Or, in the example of Jim Harbaugh visiting recruits overnight, the fact that he is a highly successful collegiate coach likely leads to more positive reception than if an unestablished coach from a lesser program showed up at the door.

EVT has been applied to intimate, ongoing romantic relationships. For example, Guerrero, Jones, and Burgoon (2000) found that when couples understand patterns of behavior it can either "enhance or destroy" relationships (p. 326). Further, research has investigated how expectancies (particularly of truthfulness) play a role in deception detection in relationships (e.g., Aune, Ching, and Levine, 1996). While literature has

given support to expectancy violations in romantic relationships, there is no existing work that has investigated the role of expectancies in the athletic recruiting context. As discussed earlier, collegiate recruiting is an environment filled with uncertainty, with high school student-athletes encountering new pressures and communication contexts as they make their college choice and prepare to transition to college. In these uncertain situations, student-athletes likely possess expectancies for interactions with the organizations recruiting them (i.e., coaches and players). Therefore, there is considerable room to explore EVT in this new context, which is the premise of the second research question.

RQ_2: What expectations do student-athletes have for the collegiate athletic recruitment process?

College Choice

Given that many elements of student-athlete college choice are similar to those of the general student population, this section begins with a review of existing models that investigate college choice. It then discusses what is known about student-athletes' decision factors for picking a school, building the foundation for my conceptual model of student-athlete college choice.

General student choice models. Student-choice models are used to describe the processes and variables involved as students and their college decisions. The predominance of literature in this area has appeared in journals that focus on the marketing of higher education. In one of the most cited approaches, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three-stage model of college choice including predisposition, search, and choice stages. Predisposition represents the time when

individuals begin to picture where they see their future selves. In this initial stage, students begin to feel connected to certain universities upon initial examination (such as those in their home state), but can also become overwhelmed by the mass influx of information (Sevier, 2000). The search stage occurs when the student interacts with the university in some way, such as on a campus visit, and evaluates it based on their particular selection criteria. Here, students seek detailed information to make more insightful decisions and narrow their choices (Sevier, 2000). Finally, the choice stage is when the individual opts to pursue chosen schools based on fit, financial aid, and the "cool quotient" – the ability to elicit the response of "cool" from friends (Sevier, 2000).

Alternatively, Dawes and Brown (2004) suggested that university choice is indeed a case of consumer decision making, and recommended adopting a brand elimination framework for looking at the decision process. In this idea, consumers first filter brands using simple decision heuristics, or filters, before later making more thorough analysis of the reduced subset of brands. For example, a consumer may first set a price window for products they will consider. A student-athlete may filter choices based on the school's athletic division or conference. Judson, Aurand, and Karlovsky (2007) supported this model, and indicated that higher education marketing extends to intercollegiate athletics in the process of recruitment and retention of the student-athletes.

Student-athlete college choice. While student-athletes and non-student-athletes share several important factors in making their college choice decision, student-athletes must also consider and evaluate additional athletic variables when selecting a school, such as play time, athletic scholarships, and potential time restraints due to game travel and practice schedules (Johnson, Jubenville, Goss 2009).

Within the higher education literature, the study of marketing and recruitment has been extended to the student-athlete population (Judson, Aurand, & Karlovsky, 2007). There have been several different theoretical approaches to understanding student-athlete school selection. One perspective focuses on status attainment (Paulsen, 2001), suggesting that recruiting is an opportunity to obtain social status. Another focuses on the student-athlete's financial considerations, arguing that college choice is really a cost-benefit analysis (Kotler & Fox, 1985; Sevier, 1996). Others suggest that students use a process of elimination to make their choice, relying only on their most important factors (Tversky, 1972; Resnick, 1987). While there is discrepancy in how the decision-making happens, it is clear that athletic recruiting is a highly complex phenomenon involving many influence factors.

> *When information from college coaches started coming in the mail, I first employed a simplistic system that filtered mail into boxes based only on athletic Division. As the piles and boxes grew, I filtered again by whether or not the school offered the academic programs I was interested in pursuing. When the process progressed to the phase of official visits, I moved from the boxes to a large white board where I could compare factors I cared most about across the schools I was still considering. I made columns on the board to clearly evaluate and compare benefits such as distance from home, presence of an Honor's program, and team competitiveness.*

Overall, student-athletes' decision factors have typically fallen into categories of academics (i.e., degree options), athletics (i.e., play time, coaching style, scholarship offer), and social factors (i.e., campus life). For example, Mathes and Gurney (1985)

surveyed 231 student-athletes and reported that the head coach and academics were most important. This finding is consistent with Letawky, Schneider, Pedersen, and Palmer (2003), who after surveying first-year student-athletes at Division I universities again saw head coach and academic services as key, with the community and sport traditions also important to student-athletes. Pauline (2010) extended a survey to include 792 student-athletes who played lacrosse at Division I-III levels and asked about athletic recruitment. He found that the availability of scholarships and the potential for career opportunities influenced college choice, as well as the coach's personality. Interestingly, Pauline found differences in competition level, specifically that in Division II and Division III athletes placed more emphasis on academics in the selection process than athletes in Division I.

Another suggested means of analyzing college choice is relationship marketing. Relationship marketing assumes that consumers reduce choices by engaging in a relationships with brands, and is a strategy designed to foster brand-customer engagement (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Dawes and Brown (2004) advanced that the identity of an institution's brand serves as a tool for influence, and that informed prospective students base their college choice on the institutional brand. For this reason, universities often employ relationship marketing to attract, maintain, and enhance relationships with their potential customer base (Berry, 1983). Relationship marketing operates with the goal of reducing consumers' uncertainty (e.g., what school to select) and bolstering their brand commitment (Anderson, 2010).

Relational marketing theory emphasizes that consumers seek products that offer both *functional* and *relational* benefits (Gwinner et al., 1998). Functional benefits include those benefits that make the item utilitarian for the consumer. Relational benefits lead the

consumer to feel a sense of identification with the goals of the sponsoring organization (Koritos, Koronois, Stahakapulous, 2012). An individual's college choice is a decision that the consumer (student-athlete) makes between different products (schools), each offering distinctive costs and benefits. From Pauline's (2010) research on student-athlete college choice, it is clear there are some functional benefits for student-athletes that may be highly influential, such as career opportunities and the school offering their desired major of interest.

The principle of relationship marketing of universities is applicable to student-athlete recruitment. For example, Goss, Jubenville, and Orejan (2006) detailed a combination of athletic, academic, and campus-related influences that can be utilized when fostering a relationship between the school and student-athlete. The authors argued that the best way to recruit student-athletes is to rely on relationship building that centers on these three influences, thereby producing a unique brand (Johnson et al., 2009). The brand may then be deployed by coaching staff as they embody the university brand during athletic recruitment. Johnson and colleagues indicated that coaching staff act as highly visible brand messengers who interface with the target audience (prospective recruits). They forwarded that athletic recruiting is a "brand-centric, relationship-oriented environment" (p. 6) and that universities who can capture this will reap the benefits of a strongly-defined brand with a committed following.

Further, research suggests that institutions using relationship marketing during recruiting can anticipate better long-term results with members because their institutional identity is stronger (Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). This finding, coupled with the focus of relationship marketing on how consumers seek relationships

with brands, leads to the final research question. As the recruiting process entails relationship building between the recruiter and recruit, the final research question asks about the relational benefits that student-athletes seek.

RQ_3: What are the expected relational benefits student-athletes seek when making their college choice?

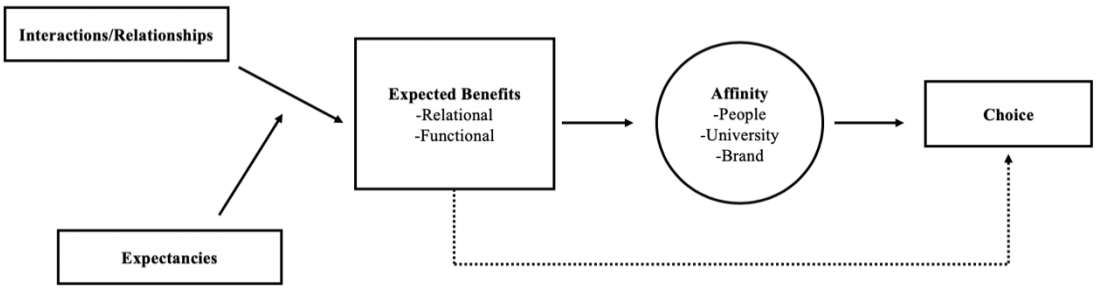
Conceptual Model

The conceptual model presented below (see Figure 1) works to connect the literatures presented from communication (both organizational and interpersonal), management, and marketing. The left side of the model depicts the interactions and relationships that the student-athletes engage in, along with the expectancies the student-athletes have for the recruitment process. In other words, the student-athletes' evaluations of the interactions and relationships are filtered through their expectations. Throughout recruiting, the student-athletes receive information which influences decision making. This information informs them about what benefits to expect if they were to select a specific school, represented by the lines leading to expected benefits in the model. Prior research on student-athlete decision factors has highlighted functional benefits. For example, Doyle and Gaeth (1990) reported that scholarship amount was among the most influential factors for student-athletes. Kankey and Quarterman (2007) found that the availability of the student-athletes' desired major and academic program were the most highly rated factors among the 196 softball Division I athletes they surveyed. In 2008, Dumond, Lynch, and Platania indicated that the distance of the school from home was the most important factor for top Division I football recruits. Functional benefits, such as if there is a full scholarship available, have the ability to move student-athletes

from the beginning of the model directly to choice, bypassing the middle of the model. In this way, functional benefits act as heuristics or decision filters that ease the cognitive burden of college choice. The direct pathway between functional benefits and choice is illustrated by the dashed line on the diagram.

However, when faced with competing options, each offering to meet the required functional benefits, student-athletes are faced with a complex decision that carries consequences for their future (Yen, 2011). Given the importance of the decision, they are motivated and able to thoroughly consider the decision and expend cognitive energy in considering options (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). In this longer pathway from benefits to choice, I suggest the athletic recruiting process flows through affinity – a concept I will detail more in the following paragraph. The affinity notion is designated as a circle in the model to indicate that it is a new construct in the study of student-athlete recruiting.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of student-athlete college choice.



Affinity

While used colloquially in the context of branding (e.g., Kareh, 2019), affinity as a business construct has not been significantly studied in published academic research at the time of this dissertation. In 2005, Van Gelder defined affinity as a bond consumers feel with brands. Two years later, Pearlman (2007) identified the need for a construct such as brand affinity, suggesting it not only influences, but might be able to *predict* consumer buying behavior. However, neither of these sources gathered empirical data to support their propositions. The dissertation work of Murphy (2015) appears to be the only current academic work on the topic of brand affinity. I propose to not only extend this notion of brand affinity to student-athletes and their college choice, but to also investigate elements of student-athlete affinity for the people they interact with and for the organization (university) itself. Before I begin discussion of what student-athlete affinity signifies, the section below first goes into more detail on how scholars have used the term *affinity* in prior academic research.

Affinity in communication literature. Affinity has long been referred to as a force that draws one person to seek a relationship with another, primarily based on relational attributes such as mutual interest (Hartz, Watson, & Noyes, 2005). Affinity was first introduced to the communication discipline as an element of interpersonal communication defined by positive attitudes toward other people (McCroskey & Wheeless, 1976). Affinity it is considered one of the five primary functions of human communication, and McCroskey and Wheeless (1976) contended that producing affinity it is often the primary focus of dyadic communication.

In their foundational definition, McCroskey and Wheeless put forth seven categories of affinity-seeking: (a) controlling physical appearance, (b) increasing positive self-disclosure, (c) stressing areas of positive similarity, (d) providing positive reinforcement, (e) expressing cooperation, (f) complying with the other person's wishes, and (g) fulfilling the other person's needs (McCroskey & Wheeless, 1976). By including elements of social influence (e.g., liking) in their definition, it suggests that affinity is related to perceptions of source credibility, attraction, and similarity. Their definition denotes that a student-athlete's affinity can be strategically shaped by college coaches, yet does not indicate what the *feeling* of affinity entails. In the recruiting context, such a definition indicates that coaches may strategically use recruiting tactics to influence recruits.

Building on McCroskey and Wheeless (1976), communication scholars primarily have applied affinity in the interpersonal context, through the affinity-seeking function of communication (Bell & Daly, 1984). Generating affinity involves using both verbal and nonverbal messages in an attempt to influence levels of attraction (Bell & Daly, 1984). Bell and Daly created a 25-item typology of affinity-seeking techniques that people may employ to build positive attitudes in others. Their typology includes attributes such as altruism, dynamism, similarity, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Similar interpersonal influence has been evidenced in the context of athletic recruiting. For instance, Magnusen (2011) examined the way a recruiter's political skill, or persuasive expertise, influenced the college selection of their prospective recruits.

Affinity-seeking offers a dynamic and communicative approach to understanding attraction between individuals. It suggests that liking can be a means to other end goals of

communication, such as compliance gaining (Marwell & Schmitt, 1967). This notion was supported by Miller, Boster, Roloff, and Seibold's (1977) work on compliance-gaining, which found that liking acts as a form of "friendly persuasion" (p. 48) with strong application for situations of both non-interpersonal and interpersonal, short-term and long-term consequences. Thus, individuals may pursue compliance goals by generating liking, just as a recruiter may incite a recruit to commit to a school by fostering affinity.

Few, if any, studies investigate the receiver's reactions to affinity-seeking behaviors. In other words, it is uncommon for communication research to assess affinity as a measured outcome of interaction. The model above assumes that affinity is a feeling that can be fostered. Student-athlete affinity represents a feeling of attraction toward a university that is cultivated via interpersonal interactions and relationships (i.e., the left side of the model). These interpersonal relationships are made throughout athletic recruitment, and include meetings such as those between the student-athlete and members of the coaching staff or potential teammates.

Affinity in organizational literature. There is relatively little literature on affinity as it relates to organizations, though work on identification has touched on elements of affinity. Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggested that identification is a feeling that is core to one's social identity. Pratt (1998) extended this idea and offered that there are distinctive pathways to identification. He proposed the notion of *identification by affinity*, which occurs over time through a natural, fluid process (Ashforth et al., 2008). Pratt's (1998) definition is connected to Schneider's (1987) concept of attraction, where individuals are drawn to organizations that they perceive as similar to themselves. So, *identification by affinity* occurs when individuals recognize an organization that shares

similar values and beliefs that are core to their own identity. For the purpose of athletic recruiting, it is appropriate to view the college choice process as *identification through affinity*, as student-athletes seek to find university organizations similar to their values.

Affinity in sports literature. In the academic literature on sport, affinity is most often associated with fandom. The sports fandom literature primarily draws on Ashforth and Mael's (1989) definition of organizational identification. For instance, Pritchard, Stinson, and Patton (2010) conducted a study that showed how fans identify with sports teams through the psychological processes of affinity and affiliation. The authors build their work on Foster and Hyatt's (2007) definition of fan affinity as being when individuals feel they are identifying with the team because it is similar to them. Essentially, they argue fan affinity occurs when there is congruence between a team brand's image and the fan's self-image. The experience of affinity can be rather strong, and fans often feel a *need* to join a specific group or become an enthusiast (Pritchard, Stinson, & Patton, 2010).

Student-athlete affinity. The notion of student-athlete affinity has not been previously explored, though affinity is often referred to in real-world marketing strategies as something brand managers strive to create (e.g., Weingarden, 2019). Building on the convergences of affinity's use in communication, organizational, and sport literature, I forward *student-athlete affinity* as a new construct. In my proposed model of college choice, student-athlete affinity represents an emotional feeling of attraction and connectedness. It may occur on three dimensions: affinity for individuals, affinity for the university, and affinity for the brand. Student-athlete affinity is developed over time through ongoing relational exchanges between the student-athlete and the university.

I contend that a student-athlete possesses a set of expectations for relational benefits that they desire from potential universities, and that meeting or failing to meet these expectations contributes to the student-athlete's overall affinity. While affinity formation certainty may begin prior to athletic recruitment (and in no way ends with the student-athlete's decision to attend the school), for the purpose of this dissertation affinity is only discussed regarding athletic recruitment and college choice. To make the scope of this study feasible, I focused my three research questions on understanding the interactions and expectancies occurring during athletic recruitment – the far left portion of the model. I am only beginning to study the complex components of the model at large, and propose a future line of work designed to further expand and test the model.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This dissertation took a grounded theory approach to understanding athletic recruiting from the perspective of the student-athlete. Methods included focus group interviewing and a thematic data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The goal of using inductive analysis was to allow the data to inform the research. The rationale behind using a qualitative approach for this dissertation is outlined below. Following the rationale is a description of the coding and analysis process.

Qualitative Approach

This dissertation represents the start of a body of work which will ultimately investigate athletic recruiting using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to expand and test the model introduced in Figure 1. With that in mind, as an exploratory first step, the project used a qualitative lens through which to first explore collegiate athletic recruiting. The qualitative approach allows researchers to seek rich and detailed data that can then be used to fuel future work. Qualitative methods are useful at the start of large programs of research in that they allow the researcher to probe for additional clarification and insight from participants who possess deep understanding of the issue at hand (Charmaz, 1996).

As a post-positivist, I sought a qualitative method that could bridge positivistic and interpretive methods, a feature that grounded theory offers (Charmaz, 1996). Grounded theory equips researchers with a systematic approach to qualitative inquiry, with the purpose of developing a theoretical analysis that fits the data. It involves

cumulative coding cycles that ultimately generate theory formation that is grounded in data (Charmaz, 1996).

Focus Groups

This dissertation utilized focus groups for data collection. The focus group procedure (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956, 1990) is a useful and efficient means of gathering group interview data (Lederman, 1990). The technique is rooted in group therapy methods (Szybillo & Berger, 1979), with the underlying notion that those who share commonalities will be more willing to discuss their experience with others. Scholars who use focus group methodology contend that people are valuable sources of information and that they can be assisted in mining information by an interviewer who guides group discussion (Lederman, 1990). Lederman (1990) applies focus group methodology to communication studies and details five assumptions on which the focus group methodology rests. First, people represent valuable sources of information. Second, individuals are capable of reporting on and about their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Third, the interview can assist individuals in unearthing that information through focused interviews. Fourth, group dynamics will help uncover valuable information. Firth, interviewing the group will be more fruitful than interviewing the individual. Focus groups are devoted to topics that need exploration, and the groups themselves should be somewhat homogeneous in that members of the group should share similar experiences (Lederman, 1990). As such, focus groups studies are designed to generate genuine and valuable information from a group that is superior to that which can be obtained from individual interviews.

Mixed method benefits. Focus groups are consistent with the exploratory nature of this dissertation, and are useful in exploring new research areas from the participants' perspective. The focus group approach allows room for themes to emerge which can guide future work in the area (Kleiber, 2004). For this reason, they are useful in combination with other methodologies, where focus groups can offer preliminary findings that can be subsequently investigated in larger projects (Morgan, 1997; Kleiber, 2004).

Focus groups often serve as a base for quantitative inquiry. For instance, they can be used to contribute to the creation of survey items by gathering elements that belong in a survey, providing scale dimensions and words that will resonate with the survey respondents (Bryman, 1988). In marketing research, qualitative focus group work may be used exploratorily prior to launching a large sample survey. The qualitative analysis is used to create ideas and hypotheses that the researchers then investigate further through future quantitative work (Calder, 1977). In such studies, the qualitative work is less structured, and respondents are encouraged to speak freely in the focus groups. Thus, in this dissertation, my use of focus groups allowed me to glean what was memorable and influential to student-athletes throughout the recruitment process, in their own detail. The goal of this study is to subsequently guide future quantitative inquiry.

Population benefits. Student-athletes represent a population that can be challenging to engage in research (Turrisi, Mallett, Mastroleo, & Larimer, 2006). The challenge is primarily due to their busy academic and athletic schedules, which include not only schoolwork and practice, game travel, weight lifting, conditioning, film viewing, and rehabilitation treatment. Student-athletes are also a difficult population to access

because researchers must work through proper athletic administration. Finally, student-athletes can be reticent about issues concerning athletics, as they do not want to say anything which might implicate them, a teammate, coach, or the athletic department concerning athletic practices. Further, they do not want to accidently disclose anything which may endanger their scholarship.

The current study utilized questions that required participants to reflect on their athletic recruitment – a topic which is under public scrutiny, particularly after the 2017 FBI investigation into recruiting corruption (Sokolove, 2018). Hence, I ensured that the questions did not inquire about any specific information which could be used to identify schools or coaches.

Previous scholarly work has employed focus groups to acquire information from high level athletes. For example, when the US Olympic Committee wanted to better understand athletes' peak performance, they collaborated with academic researchers. Gould and colleagues selected a focus group methodology to explore how psychological factors such as confidence and commitment, as well as social and environmental factors, affect Olympic performance (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999). The authors specifically chose this methodology for its ability to obtain detailed responses and for the participants to share information that my otherwise have been overlooked (Gould et al., 1999). Another benefit of focus groups is that when similar individuals gather, their stories give credence to one another's and offer support for their expressions (Kleiber, 2004). In this study, by having the groups focus on the topic of athletic recruiting, participants were encouraged to share stories and add commentaries to what others contributed, thus yielding a richer dataset than what individual members may

contribute. In this way, the focus group offered a protected space where the group's "synergy can create more than the sum of individual inputs" (Lederman, 1990, p. 119). This occurrence was specifically true in these focus groups conversations about athletic recruitment, where one student-athlete's account triggered another to reflect on a similar experience.

Sample

The sample for this dissertation included student-athletes at a large Division I university. Division I signifies the highest level of competition for collegiate athletics, meaning that the student-athletes represent the top athletes in their recruiting class. I purposively targeted this sample as it seemed probable that student-athletes at the Division I level had more options to choose from when making their college decision than student-athletes in lower divisions. This recruitment strategy matched what Bryman (1988) recommended, gathering a purposive sample where participants are recruited from a limited, or even singular, source. It was required that all participants be current NCAA Division I student-athletes and over the age of 18.

For a grounded theory approach, Strauss and Corbin (1988) recommend at least 10 interviews or observations (Saldaña 2016). In the social sciences, researchers are advised to stop collecting data when the investigator can anticipate responses, thereby reaching the goal of "saturation" or the point where further data collection is unlikely to create new understanding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I spoke with a total of 30 (female n=14, male n=16) current Division I student-athletes. Represented teams included: men's hockey, men's baseball, men's and women's swimming, women's soccer, women's

beach volleyball, and women's gymnastics. The sample was comprised of seven focus groups, each lasting between 25 and 30 minutes.

Morgan (1997) recommended that focus groups contain six to ten participants, but suggested the total number be dictated by the specifics of the project, as well as field limitations. For this project, I selected a smaller number of participants in each focus group in order to encourage each person to respond to each question. Groups contained between three to five participants, and were all sport-specific (i.e., participants in each focus group played the same sport). In one focus group involving swimmers, both male and female student-athletes participated. This demographic was intentional, as the men's and women's swim teams not only practice together, but take their recruiting visits together as one combined team. Participants represented each year in college, with the majority being incoming freshmen who had recently gone through the recruitment process (freshman n=13, sophomore n=7, junior n=5, senior n=3, no response n=2). Focus groups were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

Procedure

Recruitment and setting. I made connections with staff in the university's athletic department to investigate initiating data collection. In addition to receiving IRB approval (Appendix A), the study also went through the university's athletic department research approval process. My relationship to athletic department employees was extremely important in obtaining access to speak with student-athletes. With the assistance of an athletic training coach and a weightlifting coach, I coordinated times that would be most convenient for the student-athletes. The coaches advised that the research should be conducted during the summer, when student-athletes have fewer academic and

athletic obligations. Additionally, the coaches helped to find locations that would be convenient for the student-athletes.

Focus groups took place in two separate locations near areas where the various sports trained. All focus groups occurred after each team concluded a summer weight lifting session. After the coach finished the training session, they introduced me and I distributed the recruitment script (Appendix B) and flyer (Appendix C). The focus group room was located adjacent to the training facility so the student-athletes could immediately transition from their workout to the focus group. Given the difficulty in gaining access to Division I athletes (Turrisi, Mallett, Mastroleo, & Larimer, 2006), this opportunity provided unique access to participants in their natural element and at a convenient time. Participants were each compensated for their time with a $20 Amazon gift card.

Interview protocol. The focus group interview guide serves as a plan for the interview, but importantly is not a strict or inflexible agenda (Lederman, 1990). It is imperative that researchers remain open and observant in regard to the group's flow. The protocol began with an introduction to me and the study, as well as gaining signed consent (Appendix D) for participation (including audio recording). Following Lederman's (1990) advice, the study introduction led directly to a warm up question to encourage participation, prior to engaging in questions that were designed to elicit specific information. The interview closed with a summary, thank you, and details concerning the gift card incentives.

Funnel approach. I entered each focus group with guiding questions (see Appendix E for focus group protocol). Questions centered on the athletic recruiting

process and specific incidents the student-athletes found particularly memorable. Participants were instructed to talk about the experience as a whole, and were not required to focus solely on one university. Supplemental to the guiding questions, I was prepared to ask follow-up questions to probe the participants' responses, and also allowed the conversation to flow naturally.

A flexible focus group interview approach is useful for exploratory research, particularly when there is a lack of existing knowledge. The flexible structure provides a space where I could learn the group's interests, rather than unintentionally impose my own agenda (Morgan, 1997). In less-structured groups, the design allows participants to discuss whatever piques their interest, for "if the goal is to learn something new from the participants, then it is best to let them speak for themselves" (Morgan, 1997, p. 40). The funnel approach, which is seen as a compromise between structured and less structured, instructs the researcher to begin broad with a broad, open beginning and end with a narrow, controlled structure. I opened by expressing curiosity in how athletic recruiting works in each group's unique sport. This wide-ranging question served to kick-start the conversation. From there, I used the funnel-approach to move toward specific questions (Bryman, 1988). I encouraged the student-athletes to reflect, and expand, on their answers. By using the broad-to-narrow approach, this procedure allowed for the participants' own perspectives to be expressed early on, and ensured that I also obtained the needed responses later in the discussion (Bryman, 1988). In all focus groups, participants expressed that they were happy to share their stories, and indicated excitement and support for academic research in the context of athletic recruitment.

Critical incidents. I based the guiding questions on the critical incident technique (Flanigan, 1954), which is particularly useful in the early stages of understanding phenomena (Woolsey, 1986). The technique asks respondents to identify events or moments that were "critical" for some purpose, and can be used to ask about both positive and negative turning points (Kain, 2004). In essence, the critical incident interview invites participants to talk to the researcher, tell a story and explain its significance for the given context. In the end, the researcher learns from identifying commonalities in participants' experiences. The technique has been praised for its real-world implications, and its ability to minimize the researcher's subjective input (Stano, 1983). Further, it is often used in conjunction with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Researcher disclosure. At the start of each focus group, I shared my experience as a former Division I student-athlete. This self-disclosure not only served as a means of building credibility, but also helped to establish trust. My intent was to help participants feel more comfortable talking about athletic recruiting with someone who understood and had lived through a similar process.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis. Unlike other qualitative methodologies, thematic analysis is not anchored to one paradigm. The exploratory nature of this dissertation supported use of thematic analysis; it allowed for discovery of insights which can be used to illuminate future work. Thematic analysis is described as a "method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Through this technique, researchers can parse narrative stories into small units of content for analysis.

In this dissertation, I (a) familiarized myself with the data, (b) generated initial codes, (c) searched for examples of these codes, (d) reviewed themes, (e) defined and named themes, and (f) ultimately produced a report of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Importantly, throughout data analysis I reflected on the data to let it guide the generation of meaningful themes (Saldaña, 2016).

Coding. The inductive analytic coding technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), is based on the work of sociologists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Their techniques are frequently drawn on by researchers who approach research with either interpretive or positivistic assumptions (Charmaz, 1996). The first phase of analysis was coding the data, and beginning to sort and define what the data represent. Initial coding using grounded theory seeks to "remain open to all possible theoretical directions suggested by your interpretations of the data" (Charmaz, 2014). Here, I looked for commonalities across what was said in the various focus groups. As opposed to quantitative coding, however, there was not a predetermined code to apply. Instead, the codes emerged as I engaged with the data (Charmaz, 1996). These codes served as a starting point for me to continue further exploration (Glaser, 1978; Saldaña, 2016).

The goal of subsequent coding was to reorganize and reanalyze data from the initial coding (Saldaña, 2016). Through subsequent coding rounds, I continued to reflect on the data while exploring them for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). Using this type of *theoretical coding*, I funneled codes into categories. Focused coding is particularly appropriate for studies that employ grounded theory, as it helps to generate major themes from the data (Saldaña, 2016). I made note of exemplars for each category and used them to assist in summarizing and comparing the data (Harding, 2013).

In the culminating step toward grounded theory, I integrated and synthesized codes (Saldaña, 2016). This was accomplished by condensing the themes into a few words to convey the analysis in an efficient fashion (Strauss & Borbin, 1998). In this phase, I elaborated on the meanings behind the data using theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1978, 2005; Stern & Porr, 2011; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A theoretical code "functions like an umbrella" covering codes formed in grounded theory (Saldaña, 2016, p. 250). The theoretical codes depict possible relationships between categories, progressing the "analytic story" toward theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 150).

The following chapter presents the findings from the thematic analysis of the focus groups. The concepts from initial coding rounds were integrated into the larger categories presented (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These themes reflect the major issues or experiences that were of concern to the participants in the focus groups (Stern & Porr, 2011). To maintain participant anonymity, data were identified in the following format: (sport, transcription page, speaker number). For example, an identifier of (1, 4, 2) indicates that the exemplar quote is from the first focus group (women's soccer), located on page four of the transcription, spoken by participant #2. Table 1 lists the focus group identifiers below.

Table 1

Focus Group Demographics

FG Identifier	Sport	Participants
1	Soccer	*n* = 4 female
2	Baseball	*n* = 3 male
3	Hockey	*n* = 5 male
4	Swimming	*n* = 1 female, *n* = 2 male
5	Beach Volleyball	*n* = 6 female
6	Swimming	*n* = 6 male
7	Gymnastics	*n* = 3 female

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This dissertation explored the collegiate athletic recruiting process from the perspective of the student-athletes. Specifically, it examined student-athlete decision-making and (a) the communication that was memorable to student-athletes during their athletic recruitment, (b) what expectancies student-athletes had for the recruiting process, and (c) what relational benefits they sought when making their college choice. The following chapter addresses each of these questions separately, and synthesizes the student-athletes' responses in their own words in order to illuminate each theme and subtheme that emerged from the focus groups. The collective findings of the thematic analysis indicated that athletic recruitment not only entails communication between the student-athlete and coach, but that student-athletes expect a close and authentic interpersonal relationship with the coach recruiting them, throughout the entirety of the recruitment process. Results also suggested that student-athletes seek to join an organization that offers them strong relational benefits.

Memorable Communication

The first research question asked what was memorable to student-athletes about the athletic recruiting process. Findings indicated that interpersonal relationships, authentic communication, stress-inducing interactions, and receiving red carpet treatment represent the most memorable communication for student-athletes.

Interpersonal relationships. During their recruitment, student-athletes interact with a variety of people representing the universities recruiting them. While most prominently with coaches, there are several other interpersonal interactions that may

occur, such as those between the student-athlete and assistant coaches, members of the team, academic support staff, and faculty members. Participants expressed that they vividly remembered those moments during recruitment that fostered these relationships. They also described how memorable *red flag* moments were, or times when they felt the relationship took a turn for the negative. Three subthemes comprise the theme of interpersonal relationships: fostering close bonds, recruiting as dating, and relational red flags.

Fostering close bonds. When reflecting on their recruitment experiences, student-athletes were quick to recall exchanges between themselves and representatives of the organization, typically coaches, which fostered close relational bonds. Student-athletes were impressed when the coaches who were recruiting them took the time to demonstrate or express care for the student-athlete, particularly outside of sport. For instance, a swimmer said that it is memorable when the recruiter "cares about me as a person, not just an athlete," and sees recruits as being more than "robots that swim up and down a pool" (4, 14, 1). Another remembered that he received a handwritten letter from a coach and thought, "this is dope" (4, 1, 2). The added effort necessary to handwrite a note not only indicated authenticity as it came from the coach (as opposed to a lower-level staff member), but made the athlete feel the coach valued him as a person. To the athlete, that was meaningful. Combined, these accounts suggest that student-athletes remember times when coaches considered the whole person they were recruiting. Specifically, when coaches interacted with student-athletes and appreciated who they represented, both within and outside of sport.

Other participants indicated that coaches made an effort to foster a familial-like bond throughout the recruiting process. One athlete specifically remembered a time when a coach reached out and "was talking about my grandmother. I was like, 'wow'" (4, 14, 1). Not only did asking about the grandmother indicate concern for the individual's family, it also signaled to the student-athlete that the coach took an effort to remember a personal detail about his/her life.

Student-athletes' 48-hour official visits to potential universities also fostered familial bonds as well. One way of doing so was through team-orchestrated social events. A gymnast described how while on an official visit, the team brought a barbeque into the gym where the team practiced in order to have a cookout with current members of the team. She commented that she loved how during the barbeque she "interacted with the coaches in a more relaxed environment" (7, 8 1). The uniqueness of the activity not only made the cookout memorable for the athlete, but served a larger purpose of instilling the sense of family. Importantly, it is the *perception* or appearance of a genuine relationship that mattered to the student-athletes, as they believed it indicated what was to come.

> *On one of my visits the head coach had a family dinner at his house. He invited all of his current team, in addition to me and my parents. Looking back, this dinner was extremely powerful. Not only did it create a family atmosphere, but we got to know the character of the head coach and his wife. I remember my mom talking about how much it meant to her to see the personality and quality of girls he selected for his team. She said that after the dinner she felt comfortable with sending me there. For me, I instantly felt part of the coach's family and knew I would be taken care of and valued at that school. While this school did not meet*

some of the other functional benefits I was seeking, it stayed on the chart of schools I was considering until the very end. In comparison to all other schools I had to turn down, this one was without a doubt the hardest. Telling that coach no felt as if I were hurting a member of my family.

Recruiting as dating. The language that the student-athletes used to describe the recruitment process often illustrated a personal relationship that mimicked courtship. For example, several commented that recruiting "felt like dating" (7, 6, 3). One individual even said he was "constantly in the friend zone… just saying, we didn't really get anywhere" (7, 7, 1) with a school that was not interested in signing him. The prevalence of this dating motif exemplified that the student-athletes not only felt a relational connection with their recruiter, but that they desired to be courted.

Related to the dating metaphor, a frequent memory the student-athletes shared was the turmoil they experienced when "breaking it off with [recruiters]" (7, 7, 1). Here, athletes used relational language to describe rejecting a recruiting offer in terms of a relational breakup. For example, a soccer player recounted that although she was "dreading this conversation," when she called and told a coach she had chosen to commit to another school, the coach said, "I'll remember who you are and it was great to get to know you and your family" (1, 10, 3). She recalled that this was one of the "favorite things that were [sic] said to me when I was down in between my two top schools" (1, 10, 3) because she had been so concerned the coach would be upset with her. This apprehension is similar to concerns that one might have over breaking up with a romantic partner. Other participants echoed her concern, explaining that they wish coaches would

"stay as a nice person and be cool" (3, 10, 7) when players turn down their offers, but in reality they often were upset with the student-athletes rejecting them.

Further dating language emerged in the focus groups, such as one student-athlete who remembered "I felt like I was cheating on [the other school] all of a sudden" (4, 11, 1) when he/she went to visit a school with a competing verbal offer. While nothing at this stage of recruiting represents a binding agreement, the participant expressed a sense of guilt over exploring other options.

One swimmer shared that when he rejected a school's scholarship offer, there was "some level of snarkiness or bitterness because we didn't go to their school (6, 6, 1). Here, a jilted lover motif emerged, where the student-athlete felt that the coach was angered when rejected. The swimmer went on to explain that some of the coaches he rejected "straight up dropped me off their radar and I was like I don't want them in my life if they're going to do that, if that's how they view me" (6, 6, 1). The way this participant described turning down a scholarship offer as if it were rejecting romantic advances revealed not only that he had felt an interpersonal connection to the coaches, but that he believed the recruiting process itself mirrors an ongoing relationship. The participant described narrowing his college choice as if he were describing being exclusive with a partner. During recruiting, the coaches express interest in athletes, offer special treatment to show they are desired, and then ultimately the student-athlete makes a choice between competing advances.

Relational red flags. Student-athletes recalled specific instances when they knew they no longer wished to continue a relationship with the coach, thereby ending their relationship with the organization. Often, these moments occurred when the coach came

on too strong, such as a for one baseball player who had a school "calling me every other day, at night, and I hated it" (2, 10, 1). His teammate agreed, suggesting that coaches should "back off a little bit maybe. Don't get too into that person. You don't want to annoy them with it" (2, 10, 2).

Such a pressure to communicate was also described in terms of wanting the student-athletes to verbally commit to an organization. One baseball player remembered that a coach frustratingly told him, "I have eighth graders that come in here and commit right here on the spot, and you're telling me you need more time to think about it?!" (2, 9, 1). The student-athlete recalled he was just 15 years old at the time and knew at that moment he did not want to go there, saying "okay, see you. It's just nuts. It's not a good recruiting tactic" (2, 9, 1). "Once I started getting screamed at, I'm just like, 'see you'" (2, 9, 1).

Such an immediate change of direction in the recruiting relationship alludes to a relational turning point (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). In the case of the athlete who was screamed at by a coach, the moment certainly represented a sudden occurrence that brought about a change in the relationship – and a change in the student-athlete's decision-making process. Given that relational turning points often influence outcomes such as closeness and satisfaction (e.g., Golish, 2000), it is understandable that this moment marked the end of their recruiting relationship. The coach's behavior gave the student-athlete insight into how future interactions may go, and in the end was the student-athlete's deciding factor in his resolution to not choose that college.

Participants also identified relational red flags in the ways that they were treated while on official visits. For instance, one swimmer described that the coach took him to

see a dilapidated athletic facility and said to him, “I mean as you know, the girls team is a lot better” (6, 3, 5). The student-athlete said it was that specific incident where the coach emphasized the higher ranked women’s team that made him know he no longer was interested in that school. Another athlete described a red flag when she learned while staying with members of the team that “this coach has mood swings” (7, 5, 1). Red flags can occur without verbal communication as well, such as for one athlete who remembered that the coach hosting him got lost four times while touring the campus. In looking back on that visit he said, “I’m not saying you have to impress me, but you’re supposed to treat them as well as they can, any recruit no matter who it is” (6, 4, 1). In what may only be brief negative interactions during recruitment such as the above examples, it appears that student-athletes are able to discern all the information they need to make a decision to *reject* an offer.

Authentic communication. In the authentic communication theme, participants described memorable communication as that which was open and honest. Several participants shared that they strongly remembered communication from the coaches that offered a realistic description of both the positives and negatives. The theme of authentic communication is comprised of the subthemes of transparency and realistic previews.

Transparency. Recruiting is, to some degree, a sales environment, with the recruiter trying to attract and persuade the desired recruit to commit, thereby influencing the student-athlete’s decision-making process. However, student-athletes strongly recommended that coaches “don’t sound like a car salesman” (3, 9, 6) and “not try to make it the right fit for somebody just because they’re a really good player…. Just being straight up honest” (3, 9, 1). The student-athletes vividly recalled times when coaches

recruiting them were *not* honest, where "I could just hear him lying through his teeth, and he was very cocky and arrogant. I just really wasn't about that" and coaches would "try to honestly talk my ear off" (4, 8, 3). With regard to recruiting tactics, student-athletes preferred when the coach was forward and honest, in ways like saying "I'm not showing you a trophy room. This is not how we are… it's more of a 'we get it done' kind of place" (2, 5, 1). Indeed, honesty was a frequent discussion point in the focus groups, and the student-athletes agreed that on recruiting trips they "look for honesty" (6, 6, 6) and can identify when the coach is a "super transparent guy… you don't find that a lot with especially collegiate coaches" (1, 7, 2).

Student-athletes also reported appreciating transparency from current members of the team that they would meet on their official visits. For example, a gymnast remembered a visit where the team was trying to convince her to commit. She appreciated that the girls were honest in their struggle with their current coaching staff, telling her, "we're looking forward to the new coaches" (7, 9, 3), which provided hope and a promising future for her if she were to join them. As another student-athlete put it, "coaches can sound really good on the phone, and they can sound really good in person, but the only way you can really truly understand the coaches is if you talk to the people on the team to really get a feel for what they actually feel about the coaches" (6, 3, 2). This relates back to the car salesman metaphor. On these visits, relationship-building time is limited, and the interactions take place in an environment where there are prescribed ways one should act. Thus, it may be difficult for the student-athlete to know if the way the coaches act is their real persona, or if it is simply a product of politeness or social appropriateness given the context. So, the recruits seek information from others around

them, such as members of the team, to tell the whole story or to validate perceptions. Thus, student-athletes seek and value transparent communication from not only coaches, but from potential teammates on visits as well. Information-seeking from peers is a primary means by which new employees assimilate to their work environments (Miller & Jablin, 1991), and it appears the same is true in the context of student-athletes assimilating to potential teams.

Realistic preview. When newcomers join an organization, they often may not fully understand much about it until they become part of it (Wanous, 1976). Organizations may offer a realistic job preview to facilitate providing accurate information to potential newcomers about the nature of work and job expectations. In doing so, they can aid prospective employees' decisions to join (Wanous, 1977). Extending the notion of a realistic job preview to athletic recruiting, part of open and honest communication with student-athletes during recruitment would then include an accurate preview of what their potential role and life (athletic, academic, and social) would be if they were to join the team.

Team members are told to impress recruits when they come to campus for a visit, to "tell them about the good stuff… emphasize more only the positives" (7, 8, 3). However, the student-athletes agreed that it is better when recruits are provided realistic information, indicating that information was more realistic when it contained both positive *and* negative information. Participants remembered asking other players "what to expect, what should we do?" and that "they gave us a rundown of what's going to happen and what to expect from practice, and this and that" (2, 7, 1). One gymnast said she would prefer recruiting to be about "honestly telling us the positives, but also the things

that are going to be hard and be like 'think about it all just so you know exactly what you're getting into'" (7, 7, 1). A hockey player expressed the same desire, saying he liked when coaches were "being honest about it, what your school has to offer" (3, 10, 6). Student-athletes appreciated when their role on the team was explained, as it "kind of gives you a little jumpstart on it, see where you're at, where they think you're going to end up" (2, 4, 1). In a negative case example, a soccer player described choosing one school due to the full-ride scholarship she was offered in high school, but that the coach later tried to take it away. She said, "it was just sneaky and he treated me really bad. It was just crappy to try and take away money especially because… I had been really open with him" (1, 5, 4). Here, a preview provided during recruitment was violated, and the student-athlete expressed a sense of relational letdown in response to her openness with the coach not being reciprocated.

Research has indicated that realistic job previews aid employees in coping with problems (Breaugh, 1983) and that job satisfaction is increased when new employees feel their employer has been forthright with them (Pitt & Ramaseshan, 1995). Student-athletes in the present study expressed similar outcomes, saying that often during recruiting "they just talk about all the good things. I don't know, I just think if you offer up everything you're going to get more like the great players, who want to embrace all of it instead of – Actually, you see guys who are just here and they have issues right away, and it's because it's a lot harder than they thought it was going to be, and all aspects of life when you get here" (3, 9, 1). This quote exemplifies that student-athletes desire a realistic preview that includes both the positive and negative sides of their new role as a collegiate student-athlete. The realistic preview not only would assist the student-athletes' decision-

making process, but participants also felt that receiving such a preview is integral to thriving in college.

Stress-inducing interactions. There emerged a prominent theme of recruiting being filled with stress-inducing interactions. In this theme, participants readily shared stories about how stressful the recruiting process was for them. Especially stressful was the idea that they did not know precisely what to expect, and the fact that they were fearful at the thought of speaking directly to collegiate coaches.

Student-athletes described communication with potential coaches as highly stress-inducing, particularly with regard to the pressure to make a decision and experiencing uncertainty about communication best practices. "Sometimes, it's all you can think about, when you get hammered by all these people" (2, 10, 2), a baseball player shared. Compounding the stress is that in addition to being recruited there are still academic and athletic pressures to perform and, "if you don't perform right, then schools can just leave, just like that. They watch your attitude, the way you walk around every day. You just got to watch every move you do" (3, 1, 2).

In part, the stress is related to the inexperience and young age of the recruits. As a soccer player alluded, "you're making a decision for them when you can't even drive yet which is kind of messed up" (1, 6, 3). However, it is not only the age that makes it stressful, but the uncertainty of the process. "It's definitely stressful because you feel like you're in the dark; I didn't know if I was going to be able to come here and how much money I was going to get until the last second" (1, 4, 1). In this example the soccer player remembered feeling stress over the steps of the process and the timeline for signing a letter of intent. The pressure only builds in these young athletes when they become aware

that there are other prospects vying for the same scholarship. Another student-athlete remembers thinking, “if I don’t commit now, I might lose this scholarship. Trying to navigate that was very stressful” (5, 11, 2). Further, the student-athletes have not previously encountered this form of business communication before, as due to rigorous athletic training calendars, many have not even interviewed for a job. “I remember the phone calls were always super nerve-wrecking” one volleyball player recalled (5, 10, 1). Her teammate agreed, saying, “I would lose sleep the night before [a coach was to call] and I would make talking points” (5, 10, 2).

Anxiety over communicating with coaches only escalated when the coaches would watch the athletes play in person. “It’s very intimidating,” a gymnast recalled, “I remember I was at Nationals and seeing the schools lined up. I was like, ‘Oh my God’” (7, 7, 3). The pressure to perform, and the uncertainty of how to act when in contact with coaches, contributes to what is already a stressful period of time during recruitment.

Red carpet treatment. A final theme that emerged as being memorable for the student-athletes was the recruiting visit as a form of status-giving. In other words, the official visit as the peak time for a coach to woo top recruits by making them feel special. “When you’re 14, 15, 16 and you’re like ‘whoah, cool, they’re rolling out the red carpet for me. Oh my God this, this, this.’ It can be really blind-siding and tricky” (1, 7, 4). A common way coaches elevated a recruit’s status was by giving them free tickets to games or bringing them to a football game and letting them walk out on the field (2, 2, 4) – and “to get on the football field, that’s pretty damn important” (2, 4, 3).

Additionally, student-athletes remembered being chauffeured around campus on a tour (3, 7, 5) in a vehicle or golf cart that was clearly identified for athletics. Such special

treatment made the student-athletes feel important, “like you’re a celebrity” (5, 7, 5). Other participants recalled being taken to see athletic awards, like a baseball player who said, “they showed me this shiny room just full of trophies of random sports… and they just kept saying that they are better than everybody” (2, 5, 4). This behavior suggests the coaches make an effort to highlight the achievements and status of the athletic department in an attempt to attract the recruit. However, the athletes agreed that it “came off as cocky” (2, 5, 3) and that they did not like that sort of atmosphere on a tour (2, 5, 4). It seems the student-athletes enjoyed the red carpet treatment when it was centered on making the recruit feel special, however when the treatment was used to gloat about the organization, the student-athletes were less than impressed.

Expectations

The second research question asked what expectations student-athletes have for the collegiate athletic recruitment process. Findings suggested the student-athletes entered the process with relational expectations and a finely-tuned assessment of themselves as both a student and athlete. Further, student-athletes acknowledged and expected risk to come with the recruitment process.

Relational expectations. This theme describes the relationship that student-athletes expected to have with the coaches recruiting them. The focus groups revealed expectations not only for a close relationship, but also for a customized experience that was designed to attract the recruit. The relational expectations theme is comprised of three subthemes: relationship seeking, personalized experience, and sugar coating.

Relationship seeking. While the student-athletes expressed a general understanding that recruiting is a business, they also suggested that they expect “there

should be a personal side to it, like getting to know who you're recruiting" (7, 7, 1). As one hockey player described, it should be important to have "a good relationship with who you're recruiting" (3, 10, 6). The participants described recruiting as an ongoing process of building a friendship (3, 10, 6). A swimmer described this process, saying "you have to meet. Start off small-talk, ease into it. Build a relationship. Build trust" (4, 12, 2). Another athlete voiced that "in ice hockey, a lot of guys who come in young… just be able to build some friendships, and not always on how well you did in hockey, stuff like that I think goes a long way" (3, 10, 6). Here, this hockey player was explaining that given how young the student-athletes are when recruiting happens, he expected that coaches would work to build friendships outside of hockey, so as to make the young recruits feel more comfortable.

The participants indicated not only that they expected to maintain interpersonal relationships with those who are recruiting them, but that these relationships should mimic friendship and engender compassion and understanding of the difficulty of their decision. Importantly, the student-athletes expressed that they expected and desired that the coaches show patience with the student-athletes. "Just don't get frustrated with kids. We're just kids. We're really young. If we don't know where we want to go to college and we're in high school – I get if you're towards the end of your senior year, the end of your junior year, you probably should have an idea, but sophomore year!?" (2, 9, 1). His teammate agreed, saying that coaches need to exhibit patience, because "you're going to make your decision whether or not they rush you or not" (2, 10, 3).

Personalized experience. Student-athletes use the recruiting experience to gauge how they will be treated if they sign with a specific school. The participants expressed

having an expectation of a recruiting experience that is catered to their unique needs, and an acute awareness that the entire process is in place to "groom them to go to that college" (6, 2, 5). Put simply, the student-athletes expect to learn about benefits, or, "what are you going to do for me?" (4, 13, 1). In fact, one participant expressed that the team she ultimately signed with was the one who told her on the visit "here's where we want our women's team to go, and what we're going to help you with" (4, 13, 2). The recruiting visit is a time wherein the coach can demonstrate their commitment to impressing the athlete, and it is clear that recruits expect them to do so.

Importantly, student-athletes are on the lookout for expectancy violations, meaning that coaches who negatively violate an anticipated behavior risk undesirable outcomes (Burgoon, 1993). As one athlete explained, "It's kind of like a calling card for me. I'm like, 'If they don't have it together for me to get there, then what are they going to do when I am there.'" He goes on to say, "that's when you know they care about each individual person and they cater to each individual person as who they are" – and for "different people we'll need to handle them differently" (6, 4, 1). This statement highlights that the student-athletes expect customized visits to meet their unique needs. In other words, they want to feel wanted. Conversely, the participants explained that when the experience was clearly *not* customized to meet their needs, it signaled a lack of interest on the part of the coach, such as when a student-athlete said he was "supposed to meet with the major professor that I was growing interested in" (6, 4, 1) on his visit, and yet the coach forgot to set up a meeting and instead took him to meet with a business professor.

Not only do the coaches who orchestrate the recruiting need to recognize and respond to the individual recruits' athletic and academic desires, but to the personal as well. As part of the official visit includes overnight stays on campus, the coach assigns one team member to host the recruit for the duration of the visit. The interpersonal interactions the student-athletes have with teammates are integral to the recruiting process, and be can either helpful or detrimental. For instance, a gymnast shared a story of her former teammate who decided to quit gymnastics during college. She recounted, "my teammate is an introvert, hates parties, didn't like talking to people and she was so upset that it broke it for her. She was like, 'I don't want to go to school, I'm going to be done with gymnastics"' (7, 10, 2). Despite her friend having the talent to get a scholarship, the participant suggested that she quit the sport "because the girls, they were more into other things in partying and other aspects instead of trying to get to know her and teaching her about the university" (7, 10, 2). Clearly, customizing the recruiting visit for student-athletes extends beyond ensuring that the recruit meets the proper academic and athletic personnel, and involves aspects of their potential social life as well.

Sugar coating. When discussing expectations for recruitment, an interesting expectation emerged in the focus groups. The student-athletes fully expected there to be sugar coating, or an element of fakeness. So, while the student-athletes desired a catered, genuine, and transparent experience, participants shared an innate awareness that they were being wooed. One participant explained that "a lot of times [coaches] can stretch the truth or honestly straight up lie to you" (6, 5, 4). For example, a coach might lie about what benefits the school offers or how much play time the athlete would receive. "There's always a little bit of fakeness that's put out there. Most of the time you just see

right past it… They are trying to sugar coat everything, make it look better than it actually is" (6, 5, 3). It appears that the student-athletes are keenly aware that the coaches recruiting them are, in their words, "blowing smoke up your ass" (6, 5, 1). A baseball player explains, "they are nicely hammering you to go to their school" (2, 4, 2), and "they're not saying it, but you know that that's what they're doing" (2, 4, 2). Thus, while student-athletes expect a customized recruiting experience, they also are keenly aware that it will be delivered persuasively (and not necessarily honestly).

Yet again alluding to recruiting as courtship, one participant enthusiastically described how, "I think everyone wants to put their best foot forward for anyone, like you go on a first date they are not going to be kicking their feet up on the table, dining room table. You dress a little nicer than you might, wear a little bit better smelling cologne maybe than you do. I don't know, but they want to put their best selves forward" (6, 5, 1). He went on to say that this behavior is understandable given the nature of the business. It appears that the student-athletes desire a genuine and unique experience, while also knowing that the recruiting process is entirely orchestrated to persuade them.

Student-athlete self-assessment. The theme of student-athlete self-assessment contributes to an understanding of how the student-athletes set their expectations going into recruitment. Participants shared how they formed expectations for what they thought they could attain from recruitment, based on personal evaluations of their skills, both in sport and school. Within this theme there are two subthemes: self-awareness and expecting feedback.

Self-awareness. Student-athletes demonstrated an acute cognizance of their own talent and limitations, both in sport and in school. Expectations for recruitment evolved

out of these self-assessments and shaped how they navigated the recruitment process. For example, one beach volleyball player expressed that when a small school made a recruiting call to her, she thought "they should want me" (5, 10, 1). Then the coach criticized her style of play and immediately the student-athlete ended their recruiting relationship because she felt she deserved better treatment. Similarly, her teammate acknowledged that "I always assumed that I would end up playing indoor [volleyball] until my seventeenth season. I realized that I wanted to go to a big school and I was way too small to do it" (5, 11, 5). In what appears to be an understanding of her limitations due to height, the student-athlete adjusted her recruiting expectations accordingly.

The same self-awareness was exhibited by a swimmer who explained his approach to contacting highly ranked schools about open positions; he said that "obviously I wasn't going to be able to go there, but I just did [email]. Hey, what the heck? Maybe on the off-chance they would be like, 'yes, come walk on'" (4, 12, 1). One soccer player explained that for a while no coaches were reaching out to her, but that she knew it was due to being from a smaller town in Oregon, where recruiting rarely occurred (1, 1, 1). This knowledge prompted her to seek alternate ways of being recruited. Here, the student-athlete takes on an additional burden of making herself visible to recruiters, with acknowledgement of her region's disadvantage. Other participants recognized that injuries in high school contributed to setbacks in their recruitment. For instance, when a soccer player tore her ACL for the second time, she said she knew "nobody else had the chance to see me. I was really lucky in the fact that I had [coach] and that he believed in me" (1, 3, 4). A gymnast voiced a similar experience, that an injury in her junior year of high school caused her to sit out an entire season and affected recruiting. She said she

understood that "I didn't have anything to give [recruiters] or any competitions" (7, 2, 2), and this understanding that she lacked material that showcased her talents shaped her expectations for scholarships.

Student-athletes indicated a similar understanding of personal skill level with regard to academic aptitude. When discussing types of schools that had recruited him, a baseball player shared that, "yes, even the Ivy League schools, I personally don't have the skills to do those classes" (2, 4, 2). A swimmer discussed a similar experience, where a family member had "probably wanted me to go to [an Ivy League school], and I reminded him of my GPA and I wasn't going to get in" (4, 8, 3). Such an understanding of individual talent and limitations contributed to the student-athletes' expectations for what offers were most realistic, or most suited for, their levels of both athletic and academic ability.

Expecting feedback. In a focus group conversation with members of a swim team, another interesting paradox emerged. While the athletes indeed expected rejection from coaches to be part of the recruiting process, they also clearly expected to be notified if they *were* rejected. One athlete claimed they would "rather just get a rejection" as opposed to not knowing at all (4, 12, 3). A teammate added that "it's difficult to figure out 'do they want me, do they not? Do I keep trying or no?'" (4, 12, 4). Another teammate chimed in that it was indeed frustrating and said, "that's so immature. Your job is to deal with us. Respond to email" (4, 12, 1). Here, the participant was judging the coach avoiding his email as a reflection of immaturity, and suggested that he expected better from them. The remaining group members all concurred, saying "at least tell me you don't want me," (4, 12, 2) and again related the recruiting process to dating,

describing that “it’s like you’re dating a girl, and then you just fly away and never come back…. She’s like ‘where’s my boyfriend?’” (4, 12, 2). In another story, a student-athlete narrated that she was in contact with her “dream school” and emailed them four times, and then had her club coach email the school, and yet never received a response back. She added that “I understand if somebody contacts you at a school, and the guys in the school’s like, ‘we don’t want them.’ At least give them the decency to say” (4, 11, 2).

The desire for feedback connects to the social influence norm of reciprocation, which suggests individuals are obliged to repay others for what they have received (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2014). Feedback occurs at various stages throughout recruiting, whether it be responding to a phone call or email, following up after a face-to-face meeting, or delivering on a promise to send information. In these examples, the recruits feel that they have invested time and effort into the recruiting process, and thus expect notification of an outcome from their communication with the recruiter, even if that outcome is negative.

Recruiting risks. While different from previous themes, an important theme that emerged in the focus groups was that of risk. Risk is important to consider when thinking of the student-athletes’ expectations and uncertainty. In this theme, participants shared how within the athletic recruiting context, nothing is guaranteed. Hence, the temporary nature of recruiting contributes to uncertainty. Compounding this uncertainty is a pressure to make the decision. The student-athletes expressed these feelings as expectancies of the recruitment process, indicating that they *anticipated being uncertain*. The recruiting risks theme includes three subthemes: fragility of offer, pressure to make a decision, and consenting to misbehavior.

Fragility of offer. There appears to be a collective knowledge that college scholarship offers are fragile. This knowledge is shared via a culture of storytelling among high school athletes who embark on the athletic recruiting experience. "Some good teams will over recruit girls, like verbally commit them then drop them when it's last minute… they'll drop certain ones and keep the ones they want" (7, 11, 3), a gymnast explained. Her teammate agreed, saying a friend had committed to a school, and then was injured and subsequently gained weight, and that the school then withdrew the scholarship (7, 11, 2).

As one baseball player explicated, "They can do whatever they want. All of the sudden, signing day comes around, and then you don't even have a letter in front of you, because they took it away. You never know. You have to give them a good reason to take it away, but did they just find someone better?" (2, 8, 1). One reason a scholarship may be withdrawn is when student-athletes make poor choices during recruiting; for example, an athlete who "was an idiot partier and stuff, and posted a picture of her holding a 40-ounce beer. The coach saw it and called her the next morning and said, 'Hey, you're cut. You're not coming anymore'" (4, 3, 1). However, other reasons were less clear, like a participant's story about a friend who was supposed to go play summer ball at his future university, but "they called him and said, 'don't even get on a plane.' They're like, 'we dropped you.' He's like 'okay, whoa, what? Holy crap'" (2, 8, 1). The athlete was astounded that years of recruiting experiences and relational development could end with a mere phone call, but acknowledged it was not uncommon.

The student-athletes also shared stories that documented a well-known risk of committing to a school early. One example was a baseball player who said, "I know kids

that committed in eighth grade, never got any better. That's the thing, like the risks that you take of committing early" (2, 8, 1). He continued, "if you don't get any better or you just stop working hard because you're already committed, then they're going to drop you. It's that simple" (2, 8 1). It is important to keep in mind that verbal commitments may span several years, which makes rejection that much more difficult to endure; "you committed to a place for a year or two, and all of sudden, see you" (2, 8, 1). A gymnast explained how stressful this risk is, expressing that in high school, "you're trying so hard to do well and just send videos to coaches and get a good scholarship, but then, once you verbally commit then you're still stressed because you have to prove yourself until you sign… you get injured and then they drop you and you're just stressed the entire recruiting process" (7, 12, 3).

Pressure to make a decision. The student-athletes said they expected some difficulties to stem from being so young during athletic recruitment, with one participant commenting that recruiting was "the most stressful part of my life before college" (7, 12, 3). Her teammate agreed, saying, "I was recruited freshman year and I got two offers the summer before my sophomore year. I didn't like that cause I was so young – I didn't know what college I wanted to go to yet" (7, 1, 5). She continued describing that she did not want to reject the best offer because she did not want to risk *not* getting a better offer later, and that if she could have waited she would have been able to make a better decision (7, 1, 5). With early offers such as hers, "if she would've waited she may not have gotten that spot" (7, 1, 3) – the risk of waiting is simply too great.

There is anticipated uncertainty when it comes to how recruiting communication is orchestrated, particularly with policy restrictions on which party (the recruit or

recruiter) may initiate contact at different periods on the recruiting calendar. For instance, "you want them to see you doing stuff every day but then they can't reach out back to you" (7, 3, 3). Frequency of communication is difficult as well, with athletes saying they did not want to be the only one calling all the time, but with their high school coaches telling them to "be annoying, call [recruiters] all the time" (7, 3, 3). It seems the pressures of the recruitment process may overshadow the joyous reward of a college scholarship. As a volleyball player commented, "it wasn't what I expected committing to feel like," saying that "you'd expect it to be like, yes, I'm going to this place and they want me there," when in reality she was "relieved almost that it was over rather than excited" (5, 12, 3). Thus, while student-athletes anticipate and expect a commitment to be a pinnacle moment of the recruitment process, it in reality feels like an added pressure.

Consenting to misbehavior. An interesting and important subtheme emerged in one of the focus group conversations that warrants further attention. One of the benefits of focus groups is that it allows room for natural conversation and for participants to build on one another's shared experiences (Lederman, 1990). In one specific focus group, the outrageous stories of others' recruiting official visits were used almost as a means of generating social stock, with athletes "one-upping" each another with increasingly outrageous stories. These stories revealed that recruiting trips come with implied and understood secrecy about information with the potential to ruin their ability to play collegiate sports.

First, a swimmer talked about a friend who went on a recruiting trip and "got really really drunk and he ended up peeing in the bed and throwing up all over the bed and ended up telling the coaches about it" (6, 9, 4). The participant continued, saying that

"swimmers on the team weren't actually going to even tell on him or anything, but he told on them himself and got them in a bunch of trouble" (6, 9, 4). Team secret-keeping was mirrored in another story of a recruiting visit where "they lost two out of the five male recruits that weekend at a strip club" (6, 10, 3). After finding the recruits six hours later, "they just played it like nothing ever happened and nobody else ever knows about it" (6, 10, 3). Some of this consenting to misbehavior may be related to peer pressure, which was evident in the next story; "they handed each of them three joints and they said they can just start smoking them whenever they wanted to… Some of them didn't and then they're like, if you don't smoke this, you're not going to be on the team… you're not going to fit in with the guys" (6, 10, 4). Here, desire for conformity to the team's cultural norms is showcased by peer pressure to misbehave.

There is also a seemingly understood protection when it comes to illegal coaching behavior on visits. "The coach handed the hosts a bunch of cash and just said, 'go have a bunch of fun. Drink, smoke, do whatever. Have a good time'" (6, 10, 4). That story then reminded another participant of a friend's recruiting experience. He recounted that the individual had watched a coach play beer pong with all of the recruits on a visit, saying of the coach, "he was the most intoxicated that night. One of the coaches on staff was playing beer pong with the swimmers on their recruiting trip and buying them the alcohol" (6, 11, 1). The conversations in this focus group suggest a culture of both understood and expected risk. Through stories passed down from those who go through the experience before them, the student-athletes enter the recruiting process with an expectation that it will be risky.

Relational Benefits

The third research question asked about the relational benefits that student-athletes seek when making their college choice. Findings suggested that student-athletes look for both interpersonal and institutional benefits of affiliation, as well as for an overall sense of fit with the organization.

Interpersonal affiliation. In the theme of interpersonal affiliation, the participants described how they sought a school that offered them benefits via relational identity. These identities may be either with the team, coaches, or the student-athletes' families. The theme of interpersonal affiliation includes three subthemes: teammate connection/sense of community, relationship to coaching staff, and relationship to family/friends.

Teammate connection/sense of community. When reflecting on how they made their college choice, student-athletes reported seeking a place where "people are in it together… a team that is going to support you no matter what" (6, 7, 4). The recruiting visit appears to be the time when athletes best get a sense of potential relational benefits, with a soccer player saying that visits are all about "vibing with the people" (1, 7, 2), and a baseball player explaining that "they set you up with players to talk to, their experience and stuff like that" (2, 5, 3). The recruiting visit is where the athletes determine fit and learn the dynamics of the teammates. One athlete details that his decision was not about the team's ranking or coaches, but that "it was more about seeing the teammates, how they interact," reflecting how he "learned a lot from those trips – just how the team is" (6, 2, 3). Recruiting trips were also where negative experiences were illuminated, such as when student-athletes noticed that potential teammates had bad attitudes, were "really catty towards each other" or "yelling at each other" (5, 8, 5). As one beach volleyball

player described, she liked that the athletes at the school she chose were all friends, saying that "you can just tell it's already the build-in kind of community" (5, 8, 1). Her teammate agreed that she was attracted to the athletic community "because I'd have a bunch of friends" (5, 9, 4).

Relationship to coaching staff. Participants also indicated that they searched for an organization that offered them a "support system that's always going to be there for you and have your best interest at heart and always try and make you better no matter what" (6, 6, 4). In general, the student-athletes described the recruiting experience as a process where they spoke with coaches to learn if they would fit with the organization, and if not, "you just move on" (2, 4, 2). An added element of the recruit/recruiter relationship was how the coach may or may not make the athlete feel at ease throughout the recruiting process. The "coaches that don't try to make you comfortable – those are the ones that are like, 'I don't want to go there'" (5, 10, 2), one athlete explained.

With the high-stakes nature of recruiting, there is often pressure for the student-athletes to commit early; "once they like you, it seems like they just start pushing and pushing and pushing. All of a sudden, the calls are coming in- getting more frequently" (2, 4, 4). In these times, the coaches that stood out to the athletes were the ones who talked them through the process and who demonstrated patience (2, 8, 1), allowing the athlete time to make their decision. Finally, an athlete who was frequently injured indicated that having coaches who had faith in her ability, even after her injury, helped because there "was so much uncertainty and they believed in me so much, so willing to still give me money like the scholarship and have me… that was a big deal to me" (1, 6,

4). Her example highlights that student-athlete impressions of the organization are indeed shaped by the coach's commitment to the long-term recruiting relationship.

Relationship to family/friends. Given the age that student-athletes are recruited in high school, the college choice decision is often influenced by family and friends. Participants frequently spoke to the fact that their close personal relationships impacted their decision making. For one gymnast, peer influence both changed her decision and subsequently validated the choice; "I wasn't planning on going here before but once I thought about going here, everyone around me was like, 'You should. You're close to home and you're in the state that you've always lived in, so you'll like it.' That helped my decision and know it was right" (7, 6, 2). For another student-athlete, her mother and father were both intricately involved in the decision making. She recalled that her mom "didn't want me to come out this far and she'd miss me but my coaches definitely were close to my dad" (7, 6, 3). Clearly, the coach had recruited the entire family – not only the student-athlete – and had focused on fostering a relationship with her father that ultimately was pivotal in her decision.

Parents are often in the position to shape their student-athlete's decision process. For example, one participant's parents "opened my eyes to [school name]" (7, 6, 2). Often, a family's affiliation with universities can establish early opinions, such as the family originating from a specific state wherein a school is recruiting the student-athlete; "Both my sisters and my dad, all went to [school name]. There was already some bias for me" (6, 3, 3). A baseball player shared a similar situation, where his "family has a lot of alumni, so when we went on tours, not only would the coach give me a tour, but my family does too" (2, 6, 1). Meeting expectations of family members, or pleasing parents,

may impact the student-athlete's choice as well. For instance, a beach volleyball player said, "My parents went to [school name] too. My whole family did, actually. That makes them super excited" (5, 6, 2). Her teammate added that she was particularly motivated to pursue scholarships because her parents really wanted her to play a sport "so that way they could come out and see me and watch me play" (5, 5, 4). Another agreed, remembering "even my grandma cried because she went to [school name]" (5, 6, 5). Thus, in joining certain organizations, student-athletes may strengthen bonds with their family members.

Student-athletes discussed the role of friends as well, and it seemed to play an influential role in their college choice, especially given that college scholarships are highly publicized in high school. One swimmer said that a lot of his friends were "pushing" for him to go to a certain school, saying "that would be awesome" if he went there (6, 9, 2). Similarly, a beach volleyball player disclosed that her boyfriend and ex-boyfriend had also gone to the school she ended up choosing, and "they definitely wanted me to [go there] because they both loved it" (5, 4, 2). Another recalled that "whenever I committed especially for volleyball, everyone thought I was the coolest person ever" (5, 5, 4). This athlete said she watched another girl her year get a scholarship and then felt like, "I'm trying to get that craze too" (5, 5, 4), indicating she indeed was influenced by her high school's peer group. Her story gives credence to what Sevier (2000) describes as the "cool quotient," or the ability of a high schooler's college choice to elicit the response of "cool" from friends.

Institutional affiliation. In this final theme, student-athletes described the relational benefits they sought via a connection to the university. This theme includes

subthemes of organizational prestige/legacy/competition and fit. The student-athletes described two aspects of fit which impacted their decision: fit to the university *with* sport, as well as fit to the university *without* sport.

Organizational prestige/legacy/competition. When joining organizations, individuals not only seek benefits from relational connections, but also from institutional affiliation. Mael and Ashforth (1992) contended that organizational antecedents to identification include prestige of the institution, competition between the institution and contemporaries, and intra-organizational competition. Findings from the focus groups were consistent with these organizational antecedents.

Student-athletes expressed a desire to join an organization that offered them personal gain. As one participant put it, the best way to recruit him was to send him information about the team's accomplishments, "whatever the team's done in the past, and then talk about what you're going to do" (4, 13,1). This comment suggests that he wanted to join an existing legacy program, just as a baseball player said he "wanted to be a part of that tradition. It's something special, and you want to be a part of it" (2, 7, 2). His teammate agreed that he chose his school because the "tradition of baseball [there] is just awesome" (2, 3, 4). The desire to join a university so as to acquire benefits is one explained by organizational identification, where individuals define themselves in terms of membership to specific organizations (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Consistent with the antecedent of perceived competition (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), the student-athletes expressed that team competitiveness/success was not only a desired benefit, but a decision factor. A gymnast said that "they care about their athletic department growing. That was a huge thing for me" (7, 4, 1). In another student-athlete's

example, “hockey competition was a big point too because they play against all the best teams in the country, so that’s the reason I chose” (3, 3, 5). A swimmer voiced a similar experience, saying that the team’s improvement in national ranking over the past four years was “honestly what got me to come here” (4, 8, 3).

Finally, the student-athletes sought successful coaches that would foster the organizational competitiveness. One swimmer said she picked a coach that was “going to surround himself with people that want to do well, that want to make this team amazing” (4, 7, 2). She identified that “that’s what I want to do. I thought it was awesome to be part of a program that was building” (4, 7, 2). In this way, the student-athlete ensured her values aligned with those of the organization, further fostering feelings of identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). She also noted that she wanted to be part of the organization’s growth and to be able to look back on the program and say, “I helped make that program what it is today” (4, 7, 2). She said this notion “got me all giddy” and was an important factor in her decision (4, 7, 2). This quote suggests that she sought a place where she could play an integral role in driving intra-organizational competition, challenging members within the organization to push toward success.

Fit to university, with sport. A significant decision factor that the student-athletes discussed was the feeling of fit – a “place where you belong” (6, 8, 4), or a place where they could envision themselves. As a gymnast recounted, she was watching members of the team on her recruiting visit and thought, “can’t wait to be here” (7, 9, 1). A baseball player described a sense of belonging that “you pretty much know when you step on campus” (2, 6, 1). His teammate agreed, saying that he specifically “was looking for that feeling” (2, 7, 1). A swimmer commented he/she knew from the second that he/she

arrived on campus and met the team that "I wanted to be here, and everything just fell into place for me" (4, 1, 2). For a soccer player, this feeling was experienced as a sense of "the greatest energy there just athletics-wise" (1, 5, 2). A beach volleyball athlete experienced the feeling in juxtaposition with other teams she visited where she felt "I could not see myself here" (5, 8, 3). Collectively, the student-athletes shared that the quest for this feeling was a major factor in their decision-making. For instance, a baseball player said that during each of his visits his sophomore year of high school he would first ask, "Do I see myself here? Do I even see myself walking around here? If no, then you pretty much know right away" (2, 6, 2).

Fit to university, without sport. Importantly, every focus group discussed seeking a fit with the university in non-athletic ways as well, because "sadly, we can't just do this forever and live the dream" (4, 14, 2). A hockey player indicated that he intentionally would remove sport from the equation when making their college choice and focus instead on finding a "place that you can be happy in all circumstances" (3, 5, 5). It seems the student-athletes did this in order to help ease uncertainties about their futures. As a swimmer described, "you also have to realize that for the majority of us… in four years, it's going to be over, four or five years. You really have to think about, your relationships are going to happen after that, it's not just about the swimming" (4, 14, 2).

Similarly, several athletes alluded to the fact "you never know what's going to happen to you. If something happens, if you have to medically retire, you have to know you still like the school too" (1, 6, 3). One hockey player's parents told him to go somewhere he would still enjoy if he incurred an injury (3, 3, 4). A soccer player said she focused on choosing the best school academically "in case something were to happen

where I needed to stop playing soccer" (1, 6, 1). The student-athletes shared that "you can like the team, you can like the coaches, but if you don't like the campus or the school itself, you can never be happy" (6, 3, 4). Acknowledging this reality, other athletes explained that they "kind of took the baseball part of it away" (2, 3, 3) or looked for someplace where if sport were taken away, "would I still actually enjoy my life?" (1, 6, 3). Thus, it appears that student-athletes making this monumental decision remove the very dimension of the decision that provides the opportunity (sport) in the first place.

Summary of Findings

Overall, findings evidenced that the collegiate athletic recruitment process encompasses several years of relationship building between the recruit and prospective organizations. This relationship is facilitated via interpersonal interactions with student-athletes and coaches. Additionally, student-athletes have expectations for these relationships, and ultimately make their college selection by considering the relational and institutional benefits of joining a specific organization and their athletic team. Chapter Five connects these findings to existing work in organizational and interpersonal communication – as well as management and marketing – to establish several theoretical and practical implications.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Drawing on the themes presented in Chapter Four, this closing chapter forwards general conclusions from the study, discusses its limitations, and proposes several directions for future research. Overall, this study looked at student-athletes' decision-making regarding which college to attend. Specifically, it investigated the role of the recruiting process and the interactions and expectations student-athletes have (i.e., the left-hand portion of the model depicted in Figure 1). Findings indicated the importance of interpersonal relationships, authentic communication, and a customized recruiting experience – all of which offer promising evidence of the need for future research in this area. The chapter begins with a summary which highlights the key takeaways from this dissertation and how they related to existing academic literatures.

Build Relationships

The first takeaway deals with relationships and interactions during recruitment. Consistent with the conceptual model in Figure 1, student-athletes enter the athletic recruitment process with preexisting expectations and criteria they will use in making their decisions. Throughout the student-athlete's ongoing relationships with the coaches recruiting them, they acquire more information to aid in their decision making. This information helps the student-athletes determine which program offers them the most appealing benefits. As forwarded in the higher education literature, student-athletes consider factors related to their athletic, academic, and social lives (e.g., Mathes & Gurney, 1985). However, this work illuminated an aspect not previously documented in the literature on student-athlete college choice – the feeling of affinity.

This dissertation first investigated what is memorable to student-athletes about their athletic recruiting process. Findings indicated that interpersonal relationships, authentic communication, stress-inducing interactions, and red carpet treatment were all highly memorable. What is most intriguing about these findings is that each of these themes involved the student-athletes' interpersonal interactions during recruitment. Thus, it offers support for the inclusion of the relationships and interactions piece of the model presented in Figure 1.

Regarding interpersonal relationships, the student-athletes described recruiting as a relationship-building process. Interestingly, there was the strong association with dating. The student-athletes expressed that the recruitment process was akin to courtship, in ways such as being given special treatment, being wooed, and having to ultimately break up with those they reject. The use of this metaphor leaves much to explore, particularly with regard to expectations for how the relationship should be initiated and maintained. For example, if romantic couples seek assurances from their partners in order to maintain a relationship (Canary & Stafford, 2001), might student-athletes also expect regular communication of assurance (e.g., the coach expressing confidence that the student-athlete will become a team contributor)? Further, it would be interesting to extend the metaphor beyond athletic recruitment and examine how the relationship with the coach unfolds after the student-athlete joins an athletic program. Certainly coaches are forecasting that certain relational expectations may be met, as my personal example below illustrates.

> *On one official visit, the coach took me and my family out to eat dinner at a charming restaurant named Amicci's. She had reserved the best table for us, and*

made sure that we felt comfortable ordering anything and everything we wished. While dining, she talked about the name of the restaurant, and how amicci means friendship – a detail which I didn't recognize was persuasive until much later. The mere act of treating my family to dinner not only showcased her interest in me as a recruit, but conveyed a sense of closeness and family connection, just like the restaurant name suggested. The coach used this dinner to get closer to my family, and to ameliorate any concerns my parents might have had about how far we were from home. Looking back, I can see how the date-like atmosphere of Amicci's was the perfect environment to create these feelings of connection.

Be Authentic

The second takeaway is based on the pronounced subtheme of authentic communication. Student-athletes specifically stated that they expected transparent communication throughout the athletic recruiting process. Their desire for honesty and openness aligns with the realistic job preview (RJP) literature, first introduced by Wanous (1973). Wanous (1973) contended that the RJP is a valuable aspect of organizational socialization. The unique process of athletic recruiting, specifically the official visit, positions the student-athlete as a newcomer who engages with the organization, sometimes in advance of officially signing a contract or letter of intent.

The RJP literature suggests that providing employees with accurate information that is important and credible can be highly effective (Breaugh & Billings, 1988). This conclusion supported Wanous (1976), who argued that utilizing an RJP with newcomers in an organization leads to lower employee turnover rates. New employees often have unrealistically high expectations upon starting a new job (Wanous 1980). Thus, providing

accurate information, even if it is negative, leads to more realistic expectations for the employee. Further, having more realistic expectations creates increased satisfaction. If it is necessary that the organization provide information that may be perceived negatively by a newcomer, Wanous suggested (1973) following the negative point with a "however…" This approach exemplifies to the employee that the employer is trustworthy and that while they are aware of the downside, they are doing their best to accommodate for it. This implication begs the question if a similar *however* statement could help soften negative information that a coach might provide to a recruit.

Though not yet explored, the findings in this study suggest that the RJP literature is highly applicable to collegiate athletic recruitment. Breaugh (1983) discovered that the timing of the RJP is critical, and that it should be used prior to the formation of judgments. Thus, using an RJP during collegiate athletic recruitment may indeed offer promising results that benefit all parties involved: the student-athletes, coaches, and universities. In offering realistic previews of what life will be like as a member of the team and institution, the student-athlete can more accurately adjust his or her expectations or select a different option.

As an example, use of an RJP during student-athlete recruitment could be related to hours dedicated to sport each week. A coach can detail what the hourly commitment per week is (and how it varies across the year), and clarify if peripheral tasks such as watching film, going to rehabilitation, weight lifting, attending meetings, and cardio are included. If expectations are not violated upon reporting their freshman year, the RJP literature suggests that the student-athlete would experience less burnout and less dissatisfaction (Wanous, 1976). Thus, the student-athlete may be more inclined to remain

committed to the team and maintain good performance. In the long term, keeping student-athletes on the team and lowering transfer rates would bring cost savings to the university.

The RJP has been demonstrated to have persuasive value (Popovich & Wanous, 1982), and has the potential to be a valuable addition to the recruiter's toolkit. Coaches can use RJPs to lower uncertainty and make the desired prospect more inclined to consider their school. Findings suggested that student-athletes find the athletic recruiting experience overall very stress-inducing. Providing an RJP may indeed alleviate some of the uncertainty and ease those feelings of stress.

Tailor the Experience

The third takeaway is for recruiters to tailor the experience to the student-athletes. This takeaway is based on the fact that the student-athletes' expectations for recruitment were twofold. On one hand, student-athletes entered the recruiting process with prior expectations of how recruitment should be enacted. Participants described having the expectation that recruiting be handled like a close, genuine relationship that might exist between people. They also expressed that they desired a personalized experience, catered to their individual needs.

In talking about this expectation, however, student-athletes displayed an acute ability to detect persuasive attempts throughout the recruitment process, such as when a coach acted like a car salesman. Student-athletes indicated that they used the recruitment period to learn what to expect if they were to indeed sign with that university. Thus, while they did seek a recruitment experience that was designed to woo them, they also desired an accurate and honest preview. Throughout the recruiting process, these

expectations may be met or violated, in either positive or negative ways (Burgoon, 1993). For example, a coach may pleasantly surprise the student-athlete with attentive and thoughtful communication. Conversely, a coach may negatively violate expectations and create a relational red flag, such as delivering an un-customized experience.

On the other hand, the student-athletes shared how they set realistic expectations for *themselves* based on self-assessment of both athletic and academic aptitude. Due to this self-monitoring, the student-athletes did expect to encounter rejection throughout the process. In other words, student-athletes do not believe that they are every coach's top pick. Because of this recognition, the student-athletes had high expectations that the coaches would give them the courtesy of notice of a rejection. Further, the student-athletes were frustrated with coaches who did not reciprocate communication, such as when coaches did not respond to email outreach, even if it were a rejection.

The final research question asked about the relational benefits that the student-athletes pursued when making their college choice. Findings aligned with organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and indicated that student-athletes seek a level of interpersonal affiliation with not only the coach, but their team, the athletic department, and the university as a whole. They voiced the importance of feeling a sense of closeness to the team, and a positive relationship with the coach. Further, student-athletes described how college choice was shaped by relationships within their family. The influence of family members, and the potential for a student-athlete's college choice to bolster feelings of affiliation with their family members (e.g., if the family has a legacy of attending a specific institution) is ripe for academic exploration.

Affinity. The focus groups with student-athletes evidenced support for the affinity component of the conceptual model. The student-athletes described an intangible sense of connection regarding fit to the university. Using words such as *feeling* and *vibe*, they described experiencing a sense of belonging (or not) at various schools they visited. Affinity was explained as a feeling of fit, both with regard to athletics and, importantly, when removing athletics from the equation. This distinction confirms the need for three dimensions of affinity: toward the people, the university, and the school's brand itself. Returning to my own recruiting experience illustrates how these different forms of affinity can manifest in the college choice decision.

> *The primary way that my university won me over was to appeal to who I was outside of sport. They first accomplished this by introducing me to the Honors program, which met my desired benefit of academic rigor. Secondly, it is very rare that a student-athlete, especially at a Division I school, is granted the opportunity to study abroad. With training and practices going year-round, it is understood that coaches do not allow that long of an absence from the team. However, the school prided itself on its study abroad programs, and it was especially encouraged for Honors students. During recruitment, the coach told me I would be able to study abroad. Of all schools I was looking at, this was a unique offer that was extremely appealing to me. It was clear they valued me as a student, not just an athlete. In my college choice decision, these factors that had nothing to do with sport meant everything to me when searching for the right fit.*

Implications

There are several theoretical and practical implications of this work. Foremost, it offers heuristic value for sports communication literature, as it investigates the communicative experience of athletic recruiting from the perspective of student-athletes. While other studies have taken initial steps at understanding student-athlete college choice, this dissertation takes a unique approach to understanding the influence of relational elements of the athletic recruiting process (Judson, James, & Aurand, 2005; Goss, Jubenville, & Orejan, 2006). The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 captures relational and communicative elements of the recruiting process and student-athlete college choice that have not previously been studied. Further, it proposes a new construct, student-athlete affinity, that can aid in understanding the ways student-athletes feel drawn to a team (and/or institution) during athletic recruitment. Future work can build on this model by testing the relationships between each of its elements. Most importantly, this work situates collegiate athletic recruiting as a communication phenomenon – one shaped by communication in various ways.

Theoretical implications. This dissertation also contributes to the existing literature on organizational socialization. Findings support the organizational antecedents forwarded by Mael and Ashforth (1992). For example, participants discussed having a desire to join an athletic organization which offered them prestige and legacy. It also demonstrates the importance of anticipatory socialization as a framework for understanding how college athletes are indoctrinated into athletic teams, athletic departments, and universities. These findings further demonstrated that athletic recruitment may be examined through the lens of socialization.

Given that successful organizational socialization leads to positive outcomes, such as lower employee turnover and overall increases in employee wellbeing (Saks & Ashforth, 1997), it is logical that sports communication researchers should continue to apply socialization literature to the context of sport. Such work may be able to offer insight for coaches and athletic organizations on how to increase student-athletes' satisfaction and, importantly, performance. Yet, while it is easy to apply concepts of organizational socialization to sport, it is imperative that sports communication researchers understand import distinctions between assimilating to a college team and to a traditional organizational setting – foremost, the age of the recruit.

With recruitment happening at younger and younger ages (Yen, 2011), the population being recruited to a college sports team is in middle school or high school. Often, the college choice decision requires that student-athletes commit to a future that they likely cannot yet even envision. The hyphenated name of *student-athlete* represents the dual-role nature of the job. Student-athletes are faced with trying to find the best fit for two different roles, which often are in direct competition. As a result, they seek information (Miller & Jablin, 1991) from networks related to both academic and athletic life. Their information networks, then, are considerably larger and more complex, as they will likely meet with coaches, teammates and non-athlete students, athletic trainers, athletic directors, faculty and staff, and academic advisors.

Using organizational socialization as a framework for examining collegiate athletic recruitment can generate benefits for the student-athletes, their families, coaches, and universities alike. However, in applying these theories, it is imperative that

researchers not neglect the distinct expectations and uncertainties of the student-athlete population.

Practical implications. In the 21st century, higher education has become both more diverse and competitive (Han, 2014). Top athletes are heavily recruited and often have their choice of where to enroll. Hence, for the organizations, this project offers insight into effective recruiting strategies, such as how a coach can reduce student-athletes' uncertainties about recruitment.

Further, positive socialization has been associated with increased wellbeing, both of the individual members of an organization, and the organization itself (Hall & Schneider, 1972; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). If schools work to better socialize student-athletes throughout the recruiting process, it may increase the student-athletes' long-term commitment to the university and improve organizational well-being. Additionally, organizations can use positive socialization to combat student-athlete burnout. Burnout is common in athletes and is characterized by an overall decrease in motivation, lack of enjoyment, and high stress (Bean et al., 2014). These factors can all negatively affect not only the athlete, but the team itself. Proper socialization is related to organizational commitment and identification (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Mael & Ashforth, 1995). Thus, this area of work is potentially valuable to universities in terms of athlete retention numbers.

For student-athletes, this research offers insight that can help them to maximize recruiting visits. For example, educating them on how to use recruiting as a time for information-seeking required to find the best fit, emotionally and physically. In the most recent published research results of the report on Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and

Learning of Students in College, the NCAA found that student-athletes' expectations about athletics and social experience were often less accurate than their expectations for college academics and time demands (NCAA, 2016). This dissertation demonstrated the importance of relationships during the recruiting period for gaining an accurate picture of what life would be like at each university. Additionally, these relationships are critical for student-athletes in their transition to college.

This work also offers potential to facilitate better health and wellness. While participation in athletics has been linked to higher self-esteem (Zimbalist, 1999), the large amounts of pressure to perform as both a student and an athlete can lead to increased psychological and physiological stress (Selby, Weinstein, & Bird, 1990; Humphrey, Yow, & Bowden, 2000). Research has indicated that the way in which Division I athletes are socialized and readied for joining college teams is critical for their transition to college (Gerdy, 1997). Gerdy (1997) also found that if student-athletes are not prepared to handle the difficulties of being a collegiate student-athlete, they are less able to become well-adjusted adults. Thus, understanding how athletic recruitment can be an effective socializing experience has potential positive health repercussions, such as reduced student-athlete stress.

Policy implications. With the shift to colleges making verbal offers to students as early as in middle school (Yen, 2011), it is imperative to consider how athletic recruitment affects the student-athletes and their families. Early commitments have potential to limit future options for both the student-athlete and the institution, and thus they come with a substantial amount of risk. For example, a middle school student is nowhere near the same person physically or mentally that they will be upon entering their

freshman year of college (Yen, 2011). Not only is the student-athlete taking a risk in hoping the experience matches what they will want in the future, but the recruiting organization is making a risky investment. If the recruit does not develop in the way the coach anticipates, the university will have wasted their scholarship monies (Yen, 2011). At the time of this dissertation, a 40-member NCAA Division I council prepares to vote on prohibiting early (young) recruiting (Pennington, 2019). This meeting is in response to the stress that early offers to middle schoolers places on the student-athletes and their families. It is clear that academic work to understand the recruitment process could offer insight for such policy decisions. Further, the NCAA publicly priorities student-athlete wellbeing. Better understanding of the process of finding the right fit not only could lead to better adjustment during the transition from high school to college, but an overall stronger sense of wellbeing for the students throughout their collegiate careers.

There are countless opportunities for recruiting violations, including bribes and misconduct during official visits (Hughes & Shank, 2008). The focus group discussions suggested that there is an expected level of misbehavior during recruiting. Specifically, the recruiting visit is a focal point of these delinquencies. On official visits, the organization assumes a large amount of liability and risk, intensified by the fact that nearly all recruits are under 18 years old (Lawrence, Kaburakis, & Merckx, 2008). The media thrives on covering recruiting allegations, with social media photos circulating of underage recruits with alcohol or engaging in drugs, sex, or violence during visits (Anderson & Dohrmann, 2004). While the NCAA currently restricts recruiting duration and costs, there exist criticisms that the emphasis should be on restrictions to better protect the underage athletes. The findings on consenting to misbehavior forward the

question of organizational consent, and if recruiting visit experiences are prioritized higher than avoiding the risk of an NCAA violation. Further academic exploration into what occurs on a recruiting visit, and moreover, what is most influential for the young athletes, would aid the NCAA in such future updates to policy regulations.

Limitations

There are several important limitations of this dissertation. Foremost, the sample should be supplemented with more data in future studies. The current sample consisted of a balance between men's and women's sports, however it would be beneficial to conduct more focus groups to complement this early work. Ideally, data would be collected across all NCAA Division I sports in order to fully compare differences across sport, such as between revenue and non-revenue generating sports. This dissertation focused strictly on Division I student-athletes, representing the highest level of athletic competition in college sports. While this decision was necessary in fitting with the scope of the study, and to begin at a level where arguably the athletes had experienced the highest levels of athletic recruiting, it leaves much to be explored. Not only are comparisons between sport necessary, but comparisons across conferences may prove telling as well. For example, the Power 5 conferences likely recruit very differently than smaller Division I schools. Additionally, research should investigate differences in student-athlete college choice behavior across all divisions of athletic recruitment.

Regarding the current study, the focus group methodology limits the ability to quantify data. The data collection could have been improved by adding an intake survey that asked about the participants' year in school, years with their current institution, and scholarship status (full-ride, partial, etc.). It would also have been beneficial to have

participants indicate how many scholarship offers they received in order to assess the quality of alternatives.

In executing the focus group interview protocol, I recognize that there exist possible order effects. Specifically, in asking the opening question about what was memorable to student-athletes, the ways in which the student-athletes responded to that question may have impacted subsequent responses. For example, many student-athletes indicated they had strong memories of authentic communication. Thus, order effects may have produced a higher frequency of student-athletes answering that authentic communication was a major expectation of the recruitment process. This limitation could be addressed by conducting another round of focus groups and reverse ordering the questions.

This dissertation dealt with current student-athletes reflecting on their recruitment experiences. History effects may also be at play, such as if a student-athlete was several years removed from recruitment and had athletic experiences that since shaped their opinion of the process (e.g., a loss or gain in playing time). To address this concern, it is recommended that future work on the athletic recruiting process be conducted longitudinally, following student-athletes throughout the entire recruiting experience. Future work should also investigate the dyadic nature of recruiting by interviewing the coach in addition to the student-athlete.

Future Directions

When considering the complex and competitive nature of the athletic recruitment process, it is difficult to ignore the persuasive strategies that are at play – both from the coach to the student-athlete, and from the student-athlete to the coach. These gaps leave

exciting room to further explore the effects of persuasive messaging during athletic recruitment. Additionally, this work has revealed promising potential for future studies which use metaphor analysis or quantitative methods.

Persuasion. Athletic recruiting entails mutual influence, with both student-athletes and coaches working to attract the others' attention. Given the overlap in interpersonal relationships and persuasion throughout recruiting, future work should be devoted to examining these persuasive messages. One area in which to do this would be to look at the ways in which coaches can strategically reduce the uncertainty of recruits. Scholarly work on uncertainty claims that when uncertainty is reduced, it may lead to increased feelings of liking and similarity (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). It would be insightful to investigate if a coach were able to minimize their recruits' uncertainty, if this would in turn lead to a bolstered sense of liking. Further, when individuals experience liking toward another, they are more inclined to accommodate their requests (Cialdini, 2016). Thus, actively reducing uncertainty may be a strategic means by which a coach could facilitate a stronger sense of connection and trust in their recruits.

During athletic recruitment there are overt (e.g., the coach sending a piece of recruiting mail to the recruit with information about the team's successes) and covert (e.g., the coach asking about a recruit's grandmother) forms of persuasion. With multiple routes to persuasion, it could be fruitful to apply the heuristic-systematic model to examine how student-athletes process persuasive messages during athletic recruiting (Chaiken, 1980).

The heuristic-systematic model (HSM) indicates two paths of message processing. *Heuristic processing* relies on mental shortcuts (heuristics) to make quick and

easy choices (e.g., wanting to attend a Division I school). *Systematic processing,* on the other hand, is more cognitively demanding and involves careful consideration of information. A significant distinction of the HSM from other models of dual processing is that it asserts heuristic and systematic processes may operate concurrently (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012).

The HSM relies on two principles: the principle of least effort and the sufficiency principle. The principle of least effort argues that individuals work to be cognitively efficient, or "cognitive misers" (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). This means that when individuals are inundated with information, one way of lessening their cognitive load may be to rely on heuristics. The sufficiency principle suggests that when making decisions, individuals navigate a delicate balance between minimizing effort and gathering enough information to feel confident in their decision. Considering the large influx of information that student-athletes receive regarding their college choice, it is probable that the principles of least effort and sufficiency are relevant to their processing.

The HSM has not been applied yet to the context of athletic recruiting. However, the model potentially offers valuable insight into the ways in which student-athletes make decisions regarding college choice. Given the consequences of the choice, student-athletes are willing to expend a great deal of cognitive effort in contemplating their decision. As described in this dissertation, the process of collegiate athletic recruitment occurs over several years, often spanning the student's middle-school and high-school careers (Yen, 2011). During this time, college coaches will start by messaging several thousand athletes to express initial interest. Such a large number means that top student-athlete prospects receive hundreds of early interest information pieces about schools. This

number is only magnified by the fact that premier athletes will receive information from Division I, II, and III schools.

It is reasonable to assume that the student-athlete cannot systematically consider all of the information they receive from all of the schools that contact them, especially in conjunction with their familial, academic, and athletic obligations. While they might satisfy the HSM requirement of being highly motivated, they are not *able* to fully engage in systematic processing (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). Thus, a student-athlete must apply decision heuristics, or filters, to help narrow initial options. One way in which student-athletes may apply decision heuristics is through the functional benefits they seek, such as division, scholarship quantity, or location from home. It would assist recruiters in being more efficient if they knew how to identify student-athletes' decision filters that may make their recruitment efforts futile.

As athletic recruiting progresses, the HSM's potential for concurrent processing is essential. Maheswaran and Chaiken (1991) found that with elevated importance, individuals are likely to use systematic processing to fully engage with the decision. So, because college choice is a major life decision, a student-athlete will likely systematically process persuasive information from the coaches. Yet amidst the influx of so much information, student-athletes may be simultaneously influenced by heuristic cues. For instance, a student-athlete can base their decision on a relational red flag, such as a coach who displays a temper during the recruiting visit. Additionally, Maheswaran, Mackie, and Chaiken (1992) demonstrated that brand name can act as a heuristic cue. This influence certainly applies to athletic recruiting, where the brand name of a school may bias the student-athlete's thought process and cause him/her to decide based on heuristic

rather than systematic processing. Future work in this area has important implications for student-athletes that are making the critical decision of where to attend college, as well as for universities who hope to maximize recruitment efforts at appropriate stages of the process.

Metaphor analysis. The title of this dissertation is a metaphor that portrays recruiting as a game. The use of game was strategic, in that it suggests that someone can win – or lose – at it. Throughout the focus groups, the student-athletes employed a variety of metaphors in addition to the game one that would benefit from further exploration. Some of these included recruiting as dating, making a friend, conducting a business, and a sales environment. An academic analysis of these metaphors that utilizes interpersonal theories such as predicted outcome value (Sunnafrank, 1986) may offer insight into how student-athletes experience and frame their side of the experience. Additionally, scholarly work on persuasion in business and sales contexts (e.g., Cialdini, 2016) may be juxtaposed with the student-athletes' language of athletic recruitment as sales.

Quantitative inquiry. While the initial academic work that has been done to uncover factors that are important to athletes is useful, there is no clear instrument that captures how the factors work together. Moreover, there is no existing way to capture the *relational connection* the athlete has for the school. As previously discussed, focus groups and a grounded theory approach were selected as the data collection and analytic techniques for this dissertation because they can be utilized in conjunction with quantitative methods.

Future work will use the data and findings presented in this dissertation to construct a testable quantitative measure of the student-athletes' relational expectations,

with the goal being to ultimately understand the ways in which interactions and relationships conjoin to build student-athlete affinity. It appears that student-athlete affinity is multidimensional. The focus group themes suggested both interpersonal and institutional dimensions. The interpersonal aspect contained elements of connections to the team, coaching staff, and family/friends. The institutional had to do with the prestige of the team and fit to the school (both with and without sport in the picture). Marketing research has suggested the construct of brand love, which should be explored in future work on athletic recruiting. Brand love builds on Sternberg's (1986) theory of interpersonal love, and entails strong feelings of affection that a consumer has toward a brand. It is a central component in consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998). Thus, the third dimension of affinity should be tested in future work that examines how affinity toward the university brand contributes to the model.

This dissertation presented a conceptual case of phenomena seen in focus groups. It advanced a communication and relational dynamics perspective of athletic recruiting, while laying groundwork for future quantitative assessment of the relationships implicated by the model. Ultimately, this research trajectory has predictive value in understanding how relational factors influence student-athlete college choice. Once a measure is established and validated, it can then be used to test effects on student-athlete burnout, transfer, and commitment to the university once students attend their chosen school. From there, comparisons can be conducted across sports and divisions of competition.

Conclusion

To close, this dissertation offered a preliminary look into the complex world of collegiate athletic recruitment. The literature review presented a conceptual model of student-athlete college choice and introduced the concept of student-athlete affinity. The focus group findings offered support for the conceptual model and highlighted the importance of relationships during athletic recruitment. Additionally, findings suggested a need for authentic communication from coaches and a customized recruitment experience that is catered to the unique expectations and needs of each student-athlete. In sum, the communication and relational aspect of recruiting is an important and understudied area of research. There exists ample room to explore additional relationships which influence the recruitment process as well. Excitingly, this dissertation sparked several directions for future studies which will continue to examine athletic recruiting from the perspective of the student-athlete, but also can examine the perspectives of the families, coaches, universities, and teammates involved. Collegiate athletic recruiting is an inherently communicative process and student-athletes' college choice is, in part at least, a relationally-driven outcome. This dissertation frames both as such and invites additional work that explores these possibilities.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Paul Mongeau
Human Communication, Hugh Downs School of
480/965-3773
Paul.Mongeau@asu.edu

Dear Paul Mongeau:

On 5/3/2018 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Winning the recruiting game: How the athletic recruitment process influences Division I collegiate student-athlete satisfaction. (Study 1)
Investigator:	Paul Mongeau
IRB ID:	STUDY00008245
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Recruitment, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Focus group protocol, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol; • Consent, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 5/3/2018.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Karlee Posteher
Karlee Posteher

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello,

I am a graduate student under the supervision of Dr. Paul Mongeau in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. I am a former Division I student-athlete, and am currently conducting a research study to examine the collegiate athletic recruitment process.

I am recruiting individuals to participate in 30-minute focus groups. To participate in this study, you must be over age 18, a current NCAA Division I student-athlete, and speak English. The focus groups will be audio recorded. The audio files will be destroyed after transcription, and transcriptions will be stored on ASU encrypted servers.

I understand your time is limited, and I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me for this focus group. All responses will be kept confidential, and any use I make of your responses, such as a quotation, will be kept anonymous. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation any time. As a compensation for your participation, you will receive a $20 Amazon gift card.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me directly at 480-862-4824.

Thank you,

Karlee A. Posteher, M.A.
Graduate Teaching Associate
Hugh Downs School of Human Communication
Arizona State University

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT FLYER

Earn a $20 Amazon gift card (in under half an hour)

Hello,

I am a graduate student under the supervision of Dr. Paul Mongeau in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. I am a former Division I student-athlete, and am currently conducting a research study to examine the collegiate athletic recruitment process.

I am recruiting individuals to participate in 30-minute focus groups. To participate in this study, you must be over age 18, a current NCAA Division I student-athlete, and speak English. The focus groups will be audio recorded. The audio files will be destroyed after transcription, and transcriptions will be stored on ASU encrypted servers.

I understand your time is limited, and I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me for this focus group. All responses will be kept confidential, and any use I make of your responses, such as a quotation, will be kept anonymous. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation any time. As a compensation for your participation, you will receive a $20 Amazon gift card.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me directly at 480-862-4824.

Thank you,

Karlee A. Posteher, M.A.
Graduate Teaching Associate
Hugh Downs School of Human Communication
Arizona State University

Scan the QR code to contact the researcher and arrange your time:

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM

Title of research study: Winning the recruiting game: How the athletic recruitment process influences Division I collegiate student-athlete satisfaction.

Investigator: Karlee Posteher, under the supervision of Dr. Paul Mongeau, *480-965-3773 (Paul.Mongeau@asu.edu).*

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?

We invite you to take part in a research study because you are a current Division I student-athlete who is over the age of 18.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to acquire a broader understanding of the recruiting experiences of Division I student-athletes.

How long will the research last?

We expect that individuals will spend approximately 30 minutes participating in the focus group.

How many people will be studied?

We expect about 30 people will participate in this research study**.**

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be part of a focus group of five student-athletes who will meet and talk with the researcher about athletic recruiting. You are free to decide whether you wish to participate in this study. Participants who complete the focus group study will be compensated with a $20 Amazon gift card.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time, it will not be held against you.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations or publications but your name and school will not be used.

Data will be stored on an ASU secure server; audio recordings will be uploaded to ASU cloud storage and will be erased upon transcription. Transcription files may be retained for future use, for no more than 5 years. All data will be de-identified and stored on a password protected computer server maintained by ASU.

What else do I need to know?

This research is being funded by the GPSA/Sun Devil Athletics Research Grant.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact Karlee Posteher at 480-862-4824 (karlee.posteher@asu.edu).

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Social Behavioral IRB. You may talk to them at (480) 965-6788 or by email at research.integrity@asu.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

Signature of participant	Date
Printed name of participant	
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	

APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

1. Distribute consent form.

2. Ask if there are any questions and allow each participant the opportunity to exit focus group if desired.

3. Introduce researcher.
    a. My name is Karlee Posteher, and I'm a doctoral student in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication. I played Division I volleyball in college and my academic research is focused on collegiate athletic recruitment. I have some guiding questions for us today, but we will let the conversation flow as is natural.

4. Proceed with guiding questions:
    a. Describe a memorable moment from your athletic recruitment.
    b. Tell me about a communication you had with a recruiter that stands out in your mind.
    c. What were your decision factors when picking a school?
    d. How did you find out about what being a collegiate student-athlete would be like?
    e. Does being a student-athlete match your expectations for what it would be like?