

Joining the team: Assessing critical factors influencing student-athlete matriculation

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**Marketing
Session 2**

**Thursday, May 29, 2008
8:30 AM - 8:55 AM**

**Presentation (25-minute)
Abstract 30**

This 25-minute oral presentation seeks to achieve an understanding of what characteristics and factors most strongly influence how certain student-athletes choose which college to attend. The significance of this research is based on the critical nature of attracting qualified prospects to opt to select one intercollegiate athletic participation opportunity over another, and the difficulty in understating how important it is for schools and programs to attract the most athletically proficient athletes possible so that their programs may experience on-field success.

Research examining the college selection process for matriculants is an area that has been examined in a few studies, but, as noted by Bateman and Spruill (1996), "is an important, and largely untapped, area which can be used to influence enrollment" (p. 185). Most of the existing research focuses on the process through which students decide on which college to attend, while other studies examine the influences on this process. Very few of these existing studies focus on student-athletes as subjects. According to Hossler, et. al. (1989), there are three basic college choice models that attempt to account for the factors students assess during their decision making process: Econometric models (as evidenced by Fuller, et. al., 1982, where students base their choices on geographic location, academic factors, and the perceived economic benefit or financial rate of return of pursuing a degree, and family background, social context and academic experiences are weighed); Sociological models (as performed by Sewell & Shaw, 1968; which evaluate social and individual factors relating to educational aspirations and the associated status of positions or occupations acquired through attendance); Combined models (executed by Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, and Litten, 1982; which combine both econometric and sociological concepts to determine the most powerful indicators to provide guidance to institutional decision makers).

This combined-model study examines responses obtained from first-year student-athletes at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III classification institution. These subjects were selected as the focus of the study to eliminate the influence of factors such as athletically related aid (where prospects might select a school solely on the basis of whether he or she was awarded financial assistance based on athletic ability - a practice prohibited at NCAA Division III schools), the extent of national media coverage garnered by the school and its programs (a factor largely beyond the direct control of institutions), and potential future professional participation aspirations (a factor more likely to influence Division I and II student-athletes, and one where a potential future professional career is heavily dictated and determined by the managers of the professional leagues in which the prospect aspires to play).

The questionnaire was developed by the authors based on the findings on the college choice process, particularly among athletes. The questionnaire is divided into two main sections. Part I asks the respondents to answer some demographic questions about themselves and their high school. Data was collected on the sport(s) in which the respondents planned to participate, gender, level of financial aid assistance received, the nature of contact the respondent received from the coaching staff, and whether or not a family member has ever attended the school. Part II of the questionnaire consists of 28 questions divided into five sections. In each question respondents were asked to indicate the extent of the influence of a factor on his/her decision to attend the school. The questions were grouped into five general econometric, sociological, or "athletic" factor categories: physical factors; academic factors, family/friend influences, financial aid factors, and athletic factors.

Each of the 28 questions scored by the respondents in Part II of the questionnaire was analyzed. The top two influences in selecting to attend the school were the offering of the academic major of interest to the student and the general physical appearance of the campus. Questions pertaining to the influence of high school teammates were among the lowest scores.

Comparisons of the responses were done by gender, by amount of non-loan financial aid received, and by primary sport using the Mann-Whitney U Test. Seven questions were found to be statistically significantly different for men and women. Four of the questions tested statistically significantly different based on the amount of non-loan financial aid but none of these four had an average rating greater than 3 (on a scale from 1 to 5). There were no significant differences in the rating of any of the physical, academic, family/friends or financial aid questions by primary sport. However, there were statistically significant differences in five of the athletic questions by primary sport.

Exploratory factor analysis was used to uncover the underlying structure of these 28 variables. The purpose of factor analysis is

2008 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2008)

to discover simple patterns in the relationships among the variables. Four groupings of the 28 questions were found and named by the authors as follows: the campus factor, the athletic communication factor, the family factor, and the athletic program factor.

This study contributes to the combined model research by investigating factors related to but not specifically sociological and econometric. These "athletic" factors are less econometric in nature, since the participation in Division III athletics is almost never based on preparation for a future professional athletic career (although some students choose to pursue careers in athletically related management capacities, which can be aided by intercollegiate athletic participation). Some athletic factors identified as important are more sociological in nature, such as family influence, but others are unique to the athletic recruiting process, such as the athletic communications factor and the athletic program factor. It could be argued that these latter athletic factors are also sociological in nature, as the appeal to a prospective student-athlete's aspirations of status relating to athletic competition and potential success.

These results also identify specific similarities and differences in the non-athletic factors that influence student-athlete choices versus those of non-athletes as identified in the general literature. Similarly important non-academic econometric influencing factors included availability of desired major. A final important contribution of the findings from this research is to provide the basis from which to tailor recruiting efforts, providing a model for coaches to use to contact and to encourage desired prospective student-athletes.