

## College Choice Factors Influencing Community College Softball Players

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A vast majority of colleges and universities within the United States provide intercollegiate athletic opportunities for their students. Additionally, student athletes, within a variety of sports, also impact universities because it is perceived that sport programs increase student enrollment and revenue generating opportunities (Coakley 2007). If universities are able to stream-line the recruiting process by addressing the most pertinent issues to potential recruits, then athletic departments are able to better increase recruiting efficiency. A voluminous amount of research has been conducted regarding university choice factors for the general student body (for example, see Kealey & Rockel 1987, Lory & Garman 1995, and Hu & Hossler 2000). Additionally, Kankey and Quarterman (2007) reported "[a]lthough not as plentiful as the studies for the general college/university studies, there has been a growing body of literature on the college choice decisions of student-athletes in general" (p. 36).

This body of literature includes research regarding male athletes (Fielitz 2001), women's intercollegiate athletics (Nicodemus 1990), male basketball players (Ulferts 1992), freshmen football players (Fortier 1986), Division III male athletes and nonathletes (Giese 1986), and football players (Kraft & Dickerson 1996). Kankey and Quarterman (2007) identified the gap in literature regarding factors influencing student athletes' choice by gender and by specific sport teams. This project represents an initial effort to address that gap. Additionally, very little research has been conducted regarding community college athletes. This research focuses exclusively on softball players and attempts to extend Kankey and Quarterman's (2007) findings regarding factors influencing the university choice of community college softball players planning to attend a four-year institution. As a result, the purpose of this project is to readily identify which college choice factors influence community college softball players when deciding to attend their present school.

The conceptual framework utilized to organize and represent the findings is a combination of Hossler and Gallaher's (1987) model and Symbolic Interactionism (SI). Hossler and Gallagher's model is a three-stage model that identifies and describes the college selection process of individuals. The choice stage, which focuses on when the student (athlete) becomes serious about a select few colleges or universities, is combined with SI, which analyzes the "reality that exists in the minds of athletes, coaches, spectators, and others involved in sports" (Coakley 2007, p. 48). Being able to interpret the underlying symbolic meaning of, for example, choosing availability of academic major over playing time or the team's social climate could be very informative to educators, athletic program administrators, and coaches.

A questionnaire was utilized to gather data from community college softball players from programs within Region Six of the National Junior College Athletic Association. Participants included scholarship and non-scholarship players and included both players on the active roster, and those players that were not. Though the group comprises a convenience, non-probability sample, such a sample will yield important results for not only Region Six athletic programs, but also college/university and other community college athletic programs across the nation by identifying the complex makeup of collegiate student-athletes' identities.

The survey, which was similar to Kankey and Quarterman's (2007) original survey and used with the first author's permission, included a section regarding the 37 choice factors influencing the players to attend a (community) college, and a demographics section, which included questions, for example, regarding race and/or ethnicity, and parental income. Respondents measured the importance of choice factors by responding to items on a five-point scale, which ranged from 5 (extremely important) to 1 (unimportant). The Cronbach's alpha for this project was .92, and the surveys collected information at one point in time.

Data were collected from community college softball players after IRB approval, contacting head coaches, and after coding the surveys and entering the data into SPSS for data analysis, the final number of usable surveys was 291 ( $n = 291$ ). Most of the respondents were freshmen (60% vs. 40%), with the modal age (46.4% of the sample) being 19 years old, and from the U.S. (89.3%). Additionally, the racial diversity of the sample was reflected in the following: White (38.5%), Black (10.3%), Asian (13.1%), Hispanic (17.2%), and "Other" (18.9%). A majority (44.7%) of respondents self reported approximate parental income to be between \$40,000 and \$54,999, with 14.1% reporting family income to be less than \$25,000 and 23.7% reporting a parental income over \$75,000. Regarding their financial and grant in aid status, 84.9% of respondents report being recruited and offered a scholarship, 52.6% receiving a full athletic grant in aid (46.4% with a partial athletic grant in aid), and almost one third of the sample (32.3%) reporting they received other, non-athletic financial aid. Preliminary statistical results indicate the five most important factors to community college softball players in this sample were head coach, availability of academic program or major, the social atmosphere of the team, career opportunities after graduation, and the cost of the college, respectively. The five

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least important choice factors for community college softball players were media coverage, the current program being recommended by their high school coach, the size of the college, the softball team's website, and the ethnic or gender ratio of the school.

The findings of this study suggest that college sport administrators can benefit from understanding the multifaceted nature of potential student-athletes' identities and should not focus exclusively on athletic facilities or resources. Understanding not only what is important for student-athletes, but also how they view themselves is crucial for not only the recruiting process, but also for student-athlete success. Additionally, the findings assist college sport administrators in developing programs and providing support resources. For example, one recommendation includes partnering with academic departments for on-campus visits by potential student-athletes. Utilizing the aforementioned theoretical framework, additional recommendations are provided in an effort to inform program, policy, and resource development efforts within collegiate, especially community college, athletics.