Coaches, Collegiate Athletes, and Recruiting: An Examination of Division I Recruitment Process

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There are over seven million high school students participating in high school athletics in the United States (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2005). A small fraction of these athletes will go on to participate in collegiate athletics. During the 2004 – 2005 academic year, there were 158,676 Division I athletes participating in collegiate sport (Vicente, 2006). From these numbers, it appears that only 2.3% of high school athletes continued on to play collegiate athletics at the Division I level and not all of these athletes will benefit from an athletic scholarship.

So, how are these athletes identified by college coaches for recruitment since coaches do not have infinite resources to travel to see every athlete across the country? A study was conducted that examined the recruitment process in Division I intercollegiate athletics. The sample consisted of 25 Division I head and assistant coaches from 10 different athletic conferences and 30 current collegiate athletes from the Big Ten, Big 12, Pac 10, and SEC athletic conferences.

Two semi-structured interview guides were developed for the study participants (one for coaches and one for athletes) and focused on the participants’ perceptions and experiences surrounding the recruitment process. All interviews were identical with the researchers covering the same scripted set of questions in the same order with all participants. However, probes were used to clarify participants’ answers or to acquire more information regarding a specific topic (Berg, 2004; Patton, 2002).

The coaches and athletes discussed their perceptions of the recruitment process from differing viewpoints and perspectives based upon whether they were doing the recruiting or being recruited. All of the coaches had both positive and negative perceptions about the recruitment process and all of the rules they must follow. However, the athletes spoke in a primarily positive manner about the process.

During the interviews, it was uncovered that the main arena from which coaches identify athletes they intend to recruit is the AAU and club team system. However, these teams require participation fees in order to be on the team. Therefore, who has access to these teams and the possibility of being identified for recruitment? Do athletes from a higher socioeconomic status have an advantage over those from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds? Further, why do coaches choose to primarily identify and recruit athletes out of these systems?

This paper will present the experiences of the collegiate athletes and coaches in this study and their thoughts on the recruitment process in general and how socioeconomic status affects the recruitment process. This topic is especially relevant given the financial difficulties facing athletic departments and families across this country.