

**The Lifeblood of College Sports: A Social Influence Approach to Understanding Recruiters, the Recruitment Process, and Student-Athlete College Choice Factors**

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Through the process of recruitment, organizations can execute one of the most fundamental means by which they can acquire premium human capital (Berkson et al., 2002; Rynes, 1991), a term which refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) exemplified in people that are of value to organizations only as they contribute to the execution of a firm's business strategy (Coff, 2002). While several studies have accentuated the importance of recruitment for short- and long-term organizational competitive advantage and success (Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Chapman et al., 2005), insufficient research has been conducted about recruiting in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports, despite its popularity, significance, and cost. Indeed, it was noted in a financial report published by the Chronicle of Higher Education that almost half of all NCAA Division I athletic departments doubled or tripled their recruitment budgets from 1997 to 2007 (Sanders, 2008).

Further, athletic directors (ADs) play a key role in developing successful sport teams through the careful hiring of coaches who are skilled on-field tacticians and adept recruiters. It is equally important for ADs to both know what influences student-athlete college choices and how to identify, screen, and then hire coaches who possess characteristics that will enhance their ability to be highly successful recruiters. By hiring such coaches, ADs may be able to reduce recruiting costs for their athletic departments because these coaches should be able to sign student-athletes without expending the same amount of time, energy, and fiscal resources as less skilled recruiters. Therefore, the limited research on recruiters in NCAA sports and how to improve recruitment effectiveness in a tight labor market, regardless of competitive level, may put aspiring and current sport administrators who seek to better understand how organizational recruitment processes manifest in NCAA sports at a disadvantage.

Given that the vast majority of recruitment research has been conducted in a non-sport context, a substantial information gap is created about a human resources (HR) process known to have a considerable impact on organization performance (Berkson et al., 2002; Rynes, 1991). Whereas HR personnel are "unlikely to play an important future role in applicants' daily work lives" (Rynes, 1991, p. 414), head coaches are comparable to business firm executives. Hence, while the impact of recruiters on recruitment outcomes in a business context have been reported as largely insignificant (Chapman et al., 2005), recruiters in a NCAA sports context are likely to be highly impactful on recruiting outcomes because of the nature of coach-athlete relationships.

Additionally, most sport-based studies on recruitment and student-athlete selection criteria (e.g., Klenosky et al., 2001; Pauline, 2010) are focused on the identification of specific factors (e.g., desired major offered) that may be important to student-athletes' college choices. One reason solely identifying factors that may influence student-athletes' college choice decisions is limited is because it does not account for the organizational recruitment process. The impact of influential agents (e.g., family) on recruits' decisions, and the influence of recruiters and the extent to which they are successful in selling (influencing) recruits on the advantages of key college choice factors, have been mostly overlooked in sport research. Thus, it is reasonable to recommend research about recruitment processes be expanded beyond customary business contexts and targets if recruitment in a NCAA sports context is to be sufficiently understood.

Specifically, one broad yet central recruitment question that needs to be addressed is: How do athletic departments improve recruitment effectiveness? More precise questions also warranting attention include: (a) How do recruiters (coaches) improve recruitment effectiveness? and (b) How do the interactions between recruits (student-athletes) and key influential agents (e.g., family, friends, high school coaches) improve recruitment effectiveness? With these

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questions in mind, the purpose of this research is to develop a theoretical model and corresponding research proposition regarding the recruitment process in NCAA sports. The proposed model, which is grounded in the reputation/information framework (Berkson et al., 2002), builds upon prior efforts to understand college choice factors and recruitment effectiveness (i.e., the quality and quantity of recruits signed in the annual recruiting cycle) in NCAA sports.

The reputation/information framework (Berkson et al., 2002) is an organization-based recruitment perspective with roots in social influence theory, and it illustrates the importance of effective recruitment programs in maximizing a firm's ability to attract top talent in a tight labor market. Social influence theory identifies the exact nature of social influence mechanisms, and its importance to organizational behavior has been confirmed through the research of various scholars (e.g., Blickle et al., 2011; Ferris et al., 2002). Specific to Berkson et al.'s framework, persuasive communication by recruiters was proposed as a mode of information transmission helping business firms leverage reputation information as a strategy to attract and then sign top talent. However, Berkson et al. did not provide explicit elaboration on social effectiveness characteristics that may contribute to recruiters' abilities to appropriately select and masterfully execute influence strategies and tactics. Accordingly, Berkson et al.'s framework is used as a theoretical point of departure in that we adapt the business model to a sport context and develop a more intricate model to explain the following: (a) how recruiters (coaches) organize college choice information as key parts of their influence strategies; (b) the process by which recruiters present influence strategies through carefully calculated influence tactics in seeking to achieve their recruitment goals; and (c) how student-athletes and their influential agents, based upon the recruiter's influence strategies and tactics, come to agree upon which school is the best fit. Inherent to the model is the idea that socially effective recruiters are able to properly select and calibrate influence strategies and tactics according to their respective competitive levels, environments, and recruiting targets. Thus, the model is not restricted to only one level of NCAA competition.

In sum, we argue that recruiter social effectiveness characteristics (i.e., political and social skill) benefit recruiters in the identification, categorization, and implementation of their influence strategies and tactics (Magnusen et al., 2011; Treadway et al., 2012). Influence strategies refer to the identification, grouping, and packaging of information by a recruiter that is likely to demonstrate a significant impact on recruit and influential agent fit perceptions. Three categories of strategy information are explored in the model: athletic factors (e.g., coach characteristics, opportunity to play, scholarship information), academic factors (e.g., availability of academic major, academic reputation, post-graduation career opportunities), and external factors (e.g., economic conditions, school location, weather, scandals and sanctions). Influence tactics refer to the mode of information transmission selected by the recruiter. Eleven proactive influence tactics (e.g., rational persuasion, pressure, inspirational appeal) based upon the work of Yukl et al. (2008) are included in the proposed theoretical model to explain how the effective presentation of strategy information promotes attentional focus, thus rendering the information more salient to recruits and influential agents. Strategies and tactics, if properly executed, are proposed to demonstrate a positive impact on recruit and influential agent aggregated fit perceptions (i.e., combination of person-job fit, person-organization fit, and person-recruiter fit). When aligned, positive fit perceptions increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for recruiters.

Specific contributions of the proposed theoretical model to research, theory, and practice will be discussed at length. For example, one contribution of the proposed theoretical model is that it unifies two largely disconnected bodies of research (i.e., research about college choice factors that are important to student-athletes and research about recruiters and their role in the recruiting process) into an integrated framework of recruiting in a NCAA sports context. In addition to recruiters, the model also accounts for the impact of influential agents on recruiting outcomes. Another contribution is that college choice information is incorporated into a framework that simultaneously accounts for the theoretical foundations of these factors (e.g., job choice theories) as well as the processes through which this information may impact recruiting outcomes. Next, specific social effectiveness characteristics are interwoven with social influence theory to address a limitation of this particular approach. Namely, social influence theory identifies the nature of social influence mechanisms while failing to explicitly identify the characteristics of individuals that make social influence attempts successful (Jones, 1990). This study addresses a limitation of social influence theory by including political and social skill factors.