The Scarcity Effect in Early Recruiting

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In July of 2016, the NCAA Division I Council recommended a proposal to revise recruiting contact rules for the 2016-2017 legislative cycle (NCAA, 2016). The proposal is a product of efforts by the Intercollegiate Women’s Lacrosse Association and the NCAA Student Athlete Experience Committee to stem early recruiting. Changes to the current legislation on early contact and early recruiting would close loopholes that NCAA coaches have exploited in efforts to secure top 8th and 9th grade talent (NCAA 2016). The recommendations for policy change are grounded in the experiences of college coaches who lament having to identify talent before the prospective student athletes (PSAs) have physically or emotionally developed, and who reject placing unrealistic expectations on adolescents that might lead to poor decision making, and ultimately result in increased transfer rates or athlete attrition (DaSilva, 2016; Fader, 2016; New, 2016).

Despite the concerning trends that coaches have witnessed, and the potential harm to adolescent sport recruits, academic literature has not examined the processes or effects of early recruiting. Research that has been conducted on recruiting student athletes has frequently been intended to inform the recruiter on the determinants of the PSAs choice in institution, with the objective of improving the effectiveness of the recruiting process for the recruiter (e.g., Klenosky, Temlin, & Troutman, 2001; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003). The objective of this study is to advance the understanding of the early recruiting processes as they affect the PSA. The issue of early recruiting is particularly salient for current and future sport managers if recommendations for recruiting policy and policy change are to be supported by empirical evidence.

The scarcity effect, an economic principle of Brock’s commodity theory (1968), is a potential lens through which the parents’ and PSAs’ cognition and behavior in an accelerated recruiting timeline can be examined. The premises of the scarcity effect are that a commodity (in this case a college scholarship offer) is more valued based on availability, perceived sacrifice, and the uniqueness associated with obtaining the commodity (Jang, Ko, Morris, & Chang, 2015; Lynn, 1989; Wu, Lu, Wu, & Fu, 2012). A scholarship offer to play at the college level is not only rare, but also represents a potential return on parents’ financial and emotional investment in their child’s elite youth sport career (Farrey, 2008).

This is an exploratory study intended to identify possible issues and sources of misalignments in the recruiting process from the parents’ perspective. Parent influence is paramount in supporting youth sport participation, and in supporting college-bound students in their choice of institution (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Thus, the parents’ perspective is not only integral to understanding the recruiting process, but can effectively elucidate the effects of the process on the PSA. The target population of survey participants will be randomly drawn from a college recruiting contact book distributed at a 2016 national recruiting event for youth girls’ soccer.

A short questionnaire, framed in the scarcity effect, will serve as a screening tool to evaluate issues parents experienced with the recruiting process, if any. In the second round of data collection, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with parents who indicate, in the questionnaire, that they were engaged in the early recruiting process with their daughter. Specifically, any parent of a PSA who is actively being recruited in the 8th or 9th grade, or any parent of a PSA who was recruited in the 8th or 9th grade will be asked to volunteer for a follow-up interview. The interview guide will be predicated on the most salient issues identified in the screening questionnaire, and the body of knowledge on the impact of the scarcity effect on perceived value and decision-making. The interviews, with 15-20 parents, will support an in-depth analysis of the early recruiting process for PSAs and their families.
Framing this exploratory study in the scarcity effect should provide an effective theoretical foundation for examining the processes and effects of early recruiting in future research. Though media reports of the perspectives of PSAs, parents, and college coaches have indicated anecdotal evidence of a misalignment in the process and effects of early recruiting (Fader, 2016), this exploratory study will be the first to empirically assess these claims. If the results indicate a misalignment in the recruiting process, as supported by media reports, the study will substantiate a series of studies on other decision makers’ (i.e., PSAs, coaches) perceptions of the recruiting process. This study will lay the groundwork to systematically examine the phenomenon through the lens of the scarcity effect.