NCAA Student Athlete Perceptions of Early Recruiting Experiences

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Recently, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has identified concerning trends in the recruitment of prospective student athletes (PSAs) that is initiated prior to the permissible contact window (September 1st of a PSA’s 11th grade year). The early recruiting contact might precipitate early verbal scholarship offers and acceptances (i.e., commitments), and has evidenced potential negative impacts on the prospective student athlete’s well-being (Fader, 2016; Yen, 2011). An investigation conducted by the NCAA (2017) corroborated media reports of anecdotal evidence (Fader, 2016; Popper, 2014; Putnam, 2017), which suggest that the accelerated timeline in early recruiting could lead to pressured and ill-advised decisions in the college choice process, and could ultimately affect NCAA athlete retention, transfer rates, and academic development.

The NCAA Division I Council approved the first significant legislative changes to early recruiting contact opportunities in men’s and women’s lacrosse. The 2017 legislation mandates that contact with a PSA, unofficial visits to campus, verbal commitments to programs, and recruiting conversations on campus may not occur with lacrosse athletes until after September 1st of their junior year of high school (NCAA.org, 2017). The NCAA Division I Council’s decision was heavily influenced by the Intercollegiate Women’s Lacrosse Association, and currently only applies to the sport of lacrosse (Intercollegiate Women’s Lacrosse Coaches Association, 2016). The NCAA Division I Council has also recognized the need for new legislative frameworks to facilitate more effective recruiting environments in sports other than lacrosse, and has recently engaged in empirical research through their committee governance structure to assess the prominence of early recruiting across all sports. Indeed, as noted, anecdotal evidence from media reports has suggested that early recruiting is exacerbated in women’s sports, and might contribute to trends in transfer and attrition rates. However, academic research dedicated to the issues and consequences specific to the early recruiting process is sparse, and includes just two law reviews (Nomura, 2009; Yen, 2011) and a qualitative study conducted with parents of PSAs in the sport of soccer (Flaherty, 2017).

To begin to address the significant gap in knowledge that is related to the processes and outcomes of early recruiting, we conducted a large-scale qualitative study with current NCAA student-athletes. Specifically, we advanced the following research questions in order meet the aims of this study:

1. In what forms does early recruiting occur in NCAA Division I lacrosse, soccer, softball, baseball, swimming, and volleyball?

2. How do early recruiting methods differ by sport? What type of contact is made, how, and through whom?

3. Who are the actors in the early recruiting process (e.g., college coaches, club coaches, parents, peers), and what roles do they play in guiding a prospective student-athlete’s decision to commit?

4. What do current college student-athletes who were recruited early identify as the psychosocial or college choice factors that influenced their decision to commit?

5. What do current college student-athletes identify as the most common consequences (positive or negative) of their early recruiting experiences?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 NCAA Division I college student-athletes who were recruited prior to permissible contact windows in their respective sports (i.e., before September 1st of their junior year in high school). The student-athlete participants (n = 21 women; n = 7 men) represented the sports soccer, softball, baseball, swimming, volleyball, and lacrosse across 10 Division I conferences. Participants were sophomores or
juniors at the time of the interview. The interview guide was predicated on the results of the recent study on early recruiting by Flaherty (2017), a review of media-reported anecdotal evidence, a review of literature on the college choice process of athletes, and insights from the NCAA Research staff.

The interviews were transcribed, confirmed for accuracy, de-identified, and uploaded into Dedoose, a software platform for qualitative data analysis. The average length of interview was approximately 40 minutes, ranging from 25 minutes to 70 minutes in length. Grounded theory methodologies will be employed in data analysis that is ongoing, predicated on open coding and inductive theme identification for qualitative data. In the open coding stage of data analysis, researchers will manually label each unit of text in five of the 28 transcripts and compare the inter-rater results of identified codes. After consensus is reached, codes will be inductively categorized into preliminary themes and subthemes. The entire dataset will then be coded by the identified themes, subthemes, and codes.

Preliminary data analysis of the interviews suggested that early recruiting is occurring across all Division I conferences, and in both women’s and men’s sports. Early recruiting contact may be occurring primarily through emails and phone calls that are relayed through the club coach, on unofficial visits, and at university or third party identification camps, a recruiting contact loophole that has been identified in NCAA sports (Fader, 2016). The preliminary analysis also indicated different recruiting cultures across different sports and gender. For example, though recruiting contact occurred prior to permissible NCAA contact windows for male PSAs, the male participants tended to take all or most of their allotted official visits in their senior year of high school, facilitating the college choice process. In contrast, female participants tended to take multiple unofficial visits and committed to a college program prior to their senior year, when official visits are permitted.

The findings will be presented as overarching themes, identified subthemes, and code application frequencies. The discussion will describe elements of the early recruiting process and factors that influenced PSAs’ decision to commit. Any deleterious psychosocial effects of the recruiting process, as identified in anecdotal evidence (Fader, 2016; Popper, 2014), will also be examined and discussed through the given context, such as gender or sport culture. The primary implication of the findings will be to guide current and future considerations for NCAA recruiting policy change.