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College Choice...Holistic Development...Career Success...College Choice

Introducing the “Lifetime Human Capital Cycle” for Intercollegiate Athletes

Landon T. Huffman

Kristina M. Navarro

Coyte G. Cooper

Abstract

The purpose of this article was to examine the college-choice factors of intercollegiate football athletes who were offered an athletic grant-in-aid to attend a NCAA Division I FBS university in the southeastern United States ($n = 74$). A modified version of the Student-athlete College-Choice Profile (SACCP) was used to collect data regarding the most influential college-choice factors. The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended question asking players to identify the three most-influential factors related to their college choice. A mixed-methods approach utilized descriptive statistics complemented by qualitative analysis techniques including process coding, pattern coding, and analytic memoing to identify the most influential college-choice factors and themes.

The theoretical framework of Lifetime Human Capital was used to explain preferences in college selection. Lifetime Human Capital is the concept that recruits will select the college that will maximize their lifetime net worth after weighing the total benefits and costs. Participants indicated “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” was the most influential factor in their college recruitment, which coincided with the theme of career development. Researchers used results from this study to construct the “Lifetime Human Capital Cycle” to illustrate the value and rationale for investing in holistic development programs.

Keywords: *Student-athlete recruitment, career development*

Landon T. Huffman is a visiting assistant professor of Sport and Fitness Leadership at Johnson University.

Kristina M. Navarro is an assistant professor in the Department of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Coaching at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Coyte G. Cooper is an author, coach, and speaker focusing on high performance at Make Your Mark Enterprises.

Please send correspondence to Landon T. Huffman, LHuffman@johnsonu.edu

Introduction

As high school students graduate, they must engage in crucial decision-making processes regarding their future career paths. While some young adults may join the labor force or enlist in a branch of the armed forces postgraduation, others seek to pursue higher education. Individuals who choose to pursue higher education must navigate decisions of college choice. Such decisions are usually complex as well as rooted in and dependent upon their individual needs, preferences, and values. Furthermore, high school graduates who are also prospective intercollegiate athletes are presented with a unique variety of college-choice factors. Individual needs, preferences, and values not only influence college choice, but more specifically affect which institution the individual perceives as the best fit (Adler & Adler, 1991; Cooper & Huffman, 2013; Cooper, Huffman, & Weight, 2011; Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Konnert & Giese, 1987; Reynaud, 1998). Such college choice factors confound the decision-making processes for contemporary intercollegiate athletes.

Intercollegiate athletic departments are commonly referred to as the metaphorical front porch of an institution of higher education (Mixon, Trevino, & Minto, 2004; Toma & Cross, 1998). Institutions that are members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), arguably the most elite intercollegiate athletic subdivision, sponsor teams that are particularly visible in the national media (Toma & Cross, 1998). Acknowledging the public perception of a university's brand is in part attributed to the respective institution's athletic successes, FBS intercollegiate athletic department personnel (i.e., coaches, support staff, and administrators) have an incentive to attract, retain, and holistically develop intercollegiate athletes (Cooper & Huffman, 2013; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Lawlor, 1998; Weight, Navarro, Huffman, & Smith-Ryan, 2014).

The recruiting process at FBS institutions requires substantial investment of time, energy, and resources. The median annual expense for recruiting at FBS institutions in 2013 was \$623,000, and among the top 25% of FBS institutions the median value rose to \$1,003,000 (Fulks, 2014). With such a substantial investment in recruiting for football programs at FBS institutions, it is appropriate to investigate the preferences prospective intercollegiate athletes consider when selecting their college. This information will better inform athletic department personnel who seek to enhance efficiency in recruiting as well as holistic programming once the prospective athletes matriculate.

Given the importance of effective athletic recruitment in the 21st century, the purpose of this exploratory mixed-methods study was to analyze the college-choice factors of intercollegiate football athletes who were offered an athletic grant-in-aid to attend a NCAA Division I FBS university in the southeastern United States ($n = 74$). A modified version of the Student-athlete College-Choice Profile (SACCP)

(Gabert, Hale, & Montalvo, 1999) was utilized to collect data supplemented by an open-ended question requesting participants to identify their three most influential college-choice factors. The theoretical framework of Lifetime Human Capital guided the results regarding attracting, retaining, and holistically developing intercollegiate athletes (Dumond, Lynch, & Platania, 2008; Kotler, 2004; Weight, et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The recruiting process involves transactions between the coach and prospective intercollegiate athlete. During this process, the coach targets a prospective athlete he or she will recruit to join a sport program and university. Next, at the Division I and II levels, the coach will offer an athletic grant-in-aid package to preferred prospective intercollegiate athletes in hopes of convincing the individual to enroll at the respective academic institution. Throughout this process, coaches attempt to influence and persuade prospective athletes using many techniques, including “official visits” (i.e., funded visits) to campus with an itinerary full of tours and meetings with the coaching staff, players, and professors, as well as personal visits to a prospective athlete’s hometown to build relationships with coaches, guardians, relatives, and friends. Most pertinent to this study, individual coaches seek to develop a relationship with prospective athletes by describing and emphasizing unique college-choice factors including academic, athletic, personal, social benefits which the coach presumes will appeal to the prospective athlete.

Lifetime Human Capital

This study utilizes the theoretical framework of Lifetime Human Capital. Dumond et al. (2008) explained how the concept of Lifetime Human Capital applies to intercollegiate athletics:

When recruits select a college, they do so to maximize their expected discounted lifetime [human capital] with respect to that choice. [It is assumed] that recruits evaluate the discounted accrued benefits of attending each school against the discounted accrued costs (p. 71).

As a result, a prospective intercollegiate athlete compares the perceived benefits with the perceived costs (both literal and opportunity costs) of attending a particular university, and then he or she selects the institution with the greatest perceived net benefits according to his or her preferences. The authors elaborated:

The benefits of attending college are assumed to be an improvement in human capital that would increase the productivity [or marketability] of the recruit in the labor market. This improvement in human capital may differ from one school to another, and [it is assumed] that any such differences are related to the academic reputation of the university (Dumond et al., 2008, p. 71).

With respect to the current study, it is appropriate to extend upon Dumond and colleague's (2008) description by drawing attention to the uniqueness of the professional football labor market (e.g., National Football League, Canadian Football League, Arena Football League). For instance, prospective football athletes may consider the reputation of the football program as a salient college-choice factor in improving their marketability and subsequent Lifetime Human Capital.

Based on the theoretical framework of Lifetime Human Capital, it is worthwhile for intercollegiate athletic personnel to intentionally pursue methods and programs that add the most perceived value to their respective program and institution. Thus, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the most influential college-choice factors prospective recruits' value and worth (both literally and figuratively speaking) in order to enhance prospective intercollegiate athletes' perceived Lifetime Human Capital as well as genuinely meet their expectations once matriculating. To facilitate attracting and enrolling prospective students who best fit for an institution, researchers across multiple disciplines have investigated the college-choice factors and decision-making processes of prospective students. To this end, the college-choice factor literature was examined to provide context for this research study.

College-Choice Factors of Intercollegiate Athletes

In one of the first studies on college-choice factors, Mathes and Gurney (1985) found that varsity intercollegiate athletes were most influenced by the academic environment and college coach during their college-selection process. Similarly, Adler and Adler (1991) reported the most prevalent influence on intercollegiate athletes' institutional selection was the reputation of the college coach. There were also a variety of athletic factors that appeared to influence prospective intercollegiate athletes' college-selection, including the perception of playing early in their careers (Konnert & Giese, 1987), athletic scholarship offered during the recruiting process (Reynaud, 1998), athletic facilities and campus visits (Hodges & Barbuto, 2002), television exposure, the opportunity to play earlier, facilitated route to the professional ranks, and/or playing in front of large crowds (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003). However, discussion from Letawsky and colleagues (2003) emphasized "the most important factor for intercollegiate athletes was the degree program options offered by the university" (p. 608).

Consequently, evidence from the body of literature has drawn a variety of conclusions about the most influential factors of prospective intercollegiate athletes prior to matriculating at their chosen institution. Therefore, it is appropriate to conduct research regarding a group of football intercollegiate athletes at a FBS institution to comparatively analyze preferences from this unique population; a population whose team receives sizeable recruiting and operating budgets due to the national visibility and revenue they generate. Furthermore, a mixed-methods approach adds unique value that the other studies lacked.

Research Question

In light of the current lived experiences of intercollegiate football athletes and a review of the related literature, the following research question was used to guide the research:

RQ1: During the college-selection process, what were the most influential college-choice factors identified by football intercollegiate athletes competing at a NCAA Division I FBS southeastern university who were offered an athletic grant-in-aid during the recruiting process to their current institution?

Methodology

Procedures and Data Collection

Data collection began on the first day of practice of the football season and concluded prior to the first game. The target population included current football intercollegiate athletes who were offered an athletic grant-in-aid during the recruiting process from their current institution. This target population was chosen because they represented the individuals who were targeted by coaches during the recruiting process; a process that necessitates substantial time, energy, and financial investments from football coaches and athletic administrators. Questionnaires were distributed in person during various team meetings (i.e., position meetings, meals, and athletic training treatment sessions). Permission to survey members of the football team at the institution was granted by the athletic administrator for football and the researchers' respective Institutional Review Board(s) (IRB).

The questionnaire used was a modified version of the Student-athlete College-Choice Profile (SACCP) (Gabert et al., 1999; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Kallio, 1995). The researchers modified the SACCP by adding factors specific to football that were not included in the original instrument, which was constructed with a broad-based target in mind. Similar to the development of the SACCP (Gabert et al., 1999), the items added to the modified SACCP were based on discussions and feedback from an expert panel consisting of five intercollegiate athletic administrators and five sport administration faculty members. Once the items were added, a pilot test was distributed to 20 current and former collegiate athletes to test content face validity of the modified SACCP, and there were no concerns. An internal consistency reliability measure was not calculated due to the nature of the survey questions as well as purpose of this research. Each item measured an individual dependent variable so it was not appropriate to group items according to common constructs as specific characteristics were desired for this study. For example, dimension reduction techniques could reasonably produce broad components such as "athletically related factors," "academically related factors," "coaching-related factors," "facility-related factors," and so forth; however, these hypothetical components are not meaningful when trying to determine the most

influential items. More information is desired to answer what it is specifically about “academics,” “athletics,” “coaching,” “facilities,” and so forth, that appealed to prospective athletes. Consequently, the researchers concluded that the modified SACCP was an acceptable instrument to use.

Intercollegiate football athletes participating in this study were asked to recall the recruiting process and retroactively rate how influential the list of 61 college-choice factors were during their collection-selection process. Subjects were asked to rate each of these individual college-choice factors using a 4-point Likert-type rating scale, which included 0 (*Not Influential/NONE*), 1 (*Slightly Influential/LOW*), 2 (*Moderately Influential/MEDIUM*), and 3 (*Extremely Influential/HIGH*), to describe the degree of influence that each college-choice factor had on their selection of which institution to attend. Respondents also had the option to respond “Not Applicable” and/or skip any question(s). A Likert-type rating scale was chosen because it represented an ordinal scale, at minimum, and an approximate interval scale (Labovitz, 1970); moreover, the researchers who developed the original SACCP instrument treated the data as interval level measurement (Gabert et al., 1999). Finally, an open-ended question requested participants to identify the three most-influential college-choice factors. This question allowed for thematic analysis of the most influential college choice-factors.

Sample

The population for this study included NCAA Division I FBS football players at a southeastern university who were offered an athletic grant-in-aid during the college-selection process ($N = 84$). The sample included 85 intercollegiate football players who were eligible to participate in the study (i.e., current football intercollegiate athletes who were offered an athletic grant-in-aid during the recruiting process to their current institution), and 74 players voluntarily responded which yielded an overall return rate of 87.1%. Only those football athletes who identified as being offered athletic grant-in-aid to their current institution during the college-selection process were included in this study. Based on the relatively high response rate, it is assumed that the responses are a representative sample of all football athletes receiving athletic grant-in-aid at this single institution, but not meant to be generalizable to all FBS football players. Each participant self-identified responses to demographic questions, and the demographic profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 74)*

	<i>n</i>	<i>% of sample</i>
Residency Status		
In-state	32	43.2
Out-of-state	42	56.8
Football Position		
Offense	37	50.0
Defense	37	50.0

Quantitative Analytical Methodology

The statistical analysis software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze responses. Descriptive statistics were employed to compute means, standard deviations, and frequency percentages for each college-choice factor. The college-choice factors were then ranked in descending order by the mean value. For the purposes of this study the mean value was used to operationally define the most influential college-choice factors relative to each item. The percentage of participants who responded “Extremely Influential” was calculated to add supplementary information to the mean scores.

The researchers concluded inferential statistical analyses (e.g., a series of *t*-tests and/or ANOVAs) were not appropriate for this exploratory study due to the relatively large number of dependent variables (i.e., individual college-choice factors), relatively small sample size, Type I error concerns, and nonnormality of responses due to a 4-point Likert-type rating scale. Research using the SACCP in the original studies examined the college-choice factors primarily by analyzing descriptive statistics (Gabert et al., 1999; Jordan & Kobritz, 2011); therefore, the current study will extend upon methodology previously used by empirically observing differences between various rankings of college-choice factors. This study adds to the body of college-choice factor literature by including a qualitative analysis of the 61 items to complement the descriptive analysis.

Qualitative Analytical Methodology

To analyze open-ended responses, the researchers employed three data analysis techniques including process coding, pattern coding, and analytic memoing. In the first round of coding, a technique known as process coding was used to search for ongoing actions, interactions, or emotions in response to choice processes as individuals discussed school preferences (Saldaña, 2009). Next, action-oriented “ing” words were assigned to themes to identify action-oriented codes that described participants’ thought processes (these process codes are depicted

in the center of Figures 1 and 2 and are discussed later in the article). Following this initial process coding procedure, a pattern coding technique was employed to recognize micro-level themes across participants that discuss specific spheres of influence to college choice (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This pattern coding technique enabled the researchers to identify codes across cases and develop collective themes in the data set. Detailed field notes were kept throughout this coding process and analytic memos to identify overarching themes in the data set. Process coding and pattern coding coupled with analytic memos facilitated the development of two conceptual models to display trends in data with respect to college choice. The findings are presented following a discussion of this study's implications. Throughout the coding process, two individuals provided process codes. Process codes were compared and then condensed into pattern codes representing the essence of the lived experience.

Results

Quantitative Analysis of Most Influential College-Choice Factors

All respondents. Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the most influential college-choice factors during the college-selection process of NCAA Division I FBS football players at a southeastern university who were offered an athletic grant-in-aid. The mean, standard deviation, and percentage of "Highly Influential" responses were calculated for each of the college-choice factors based on the responses of the entire sample. The means were then sorted in descending order, as depicted in Table 2, to reveal the most influential college-choice factors, relative to each other, of the target population.

"Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football" reported the greatest mean ($M = 2.58$; $SD = 0.73$) and highest percentage of "Extremely Influential" responses, indicating that, overall, it was the operationally the most influential choice-factor among the set of factors on the modified SACCP. An interesting finding was the college-choice factor "Increased chances of playing professional football" was tied for the ninth most influential college-choice factor ($M = 2.33$; $SD = 0.94$), and 57% of respondents selected "Increased chances of playing professional football as "Extremely Influential" during their college-selection process. However, the relatively high standard deviation led the researchers to conclude that this question solicited polarized responses, meaning many participants either responded "Extremely Influential" or selected another less-influential option toward the opposite end of the Likert-type rating scale. This college-choice factor will be further explored in the discussion.

Residency status. Descriptive statistics were employed to examine the most influential college-choice factors during the college-selection process when focusing on the residency status of respondents. Residency status is an important consideration because the strategy to recruit a "local" prospective intercollegiate ath-

lete may differ from an out-of-state prospective athlete. A mean was calculated for each of the college-choice factors based on the responses of each of the segmented samples (i.e., in-state and out-of-state intercollegiate athletes). The means were then sorted in descending order, as depicted in Table 3 and Table 4, to reveal the most influential college-choice factors of in-state and out-of-state intercollegiate athletes, respectively.

Table 2

Most Influential College-Choice Factors—All Respondents ($n = 74$)

College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Extremely Influential
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.58	0.73	69.4
Total academic value of the college's degree	2.52	0.69	63.0
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.51	0.67	60.8
Reputation of the college head coach	2.49	0.79	63.9
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.47	0.78	61.6
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.41	0.79	56.8
Academic reputation of the college	2.39	0.74	52.8
Degree programs and academic courses offered	2.36	0.71	49.3
Opportunity to win a national championship	2.33	0.81	51.4
Playing in front of large crowds and/or a sold-out stadium	2.33	0.85	52.1
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.33	0.94	57.5

Note. The scale ranged from "Not Influential" (0) to "Extremely Influential" (3)

When focusing on the responses from in-state participants (see Table 3), the most influential college-choice factor was "Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football" ($M = 2.66$; $SD = 0.60$). An interesting finding from this segmented sample was the second most influential college-choice factor, "Location of the college" ($M = 2.63$; $SD = 0.55$), which suggested that in-state intercollegiate athletes had an affinity to attending a university in their home state; however, why this affinity occurred is not answered by this study and provides an opportunity for future research. The most polarizing response among in-state participants was "Reputation of the college head coach" ($M = 2.47$; $SD = 0.84$). Presumable rationale for "Reputation of the college head coach" being polarizing may be attributed to the fact the reputation of the head coach by itself convinced the top in-state talent not to leave the state, thus resulting in more than 65% of participants citing that factor as "Extremely Influential." On the other hand, the other 35% of in-state participants may not have found the reputation of

the college head coach to be extremely influential because their affinity to attend the school may have trumped the current reputation of the college head coach.

Table 3

Most Influential College-Choice Factors–In-state Respondents (n = 32)

College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Extremely Influential
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.66 (1)	0.60	71.9
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.63 (2)	0.61	68.8
Location of the college (town, city, and/or state)	2.63 (2)	0.55	65.6
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.53 (4)	0.62	59.4
Total academic value of the college's degree	2.50 (5)	0.72	62.5
Relationships with potential college teammates at the college	2.47 (6)	0.76	59.4
Academic reputation of the college	2.47 (6)	0.67	56.3
Reputation of the college head coach	2.47 (6)	0.84	65.6
Degree programs and academic courses offered	2.42 (9)	0.72	54.8
Playing in front of large crowds and/or a sold-out stadium	2.37 (10)	0.79	53.1

Note. The scale ranged from "Not Influential" (0) to "Extremely Influential" (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

Table 4

Most Influential College-Choice Factors–Out-of-state Respondents (n = 42)

College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Extremely Influential
Total academic value of the college's degree	2.54 (1)	0.67	63.4
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.52 (2)	0.82	67.5
Reputation of the college head coach	2.50 (3)	0.75	62.5
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.50 (3)	0.71	61.9
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.45 (5)	0.74	57.1
Quality of the football center's facilities	2.38 (6)	0.83	54.8
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.37 (7)	0.89	58.5
Opportunity to win a national championship	2.35 (8)	0.80	52.5
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.34 (9)	0.88	56.1
Academic reputation of the college	2.33 (10)	0.80	50.0

Note. The scale ranged from "Not Influential" (0) to "Extremely Influential" (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

Table 4 illustrates the most influential college-choice factors of the out-of-state respondents. The most influential college-choice factor of respondents who identified as out-of-state intercollegiate athletes was "Total academic value of the college's degree" ($M = 2.54$; $SD = 0.67$). In general, there were relatively high standard deviations for the top influential college-choice factors among out-of-state football players at the university. The variance suggested even among the top ten most influential college-choice factors, there was not unanimous agreement. The most variability of influence from out-of-state participants (among top-10 factors) occurred on the item "Increased chances of playing professional football" ($M = 2.37$; $SD = 0.89$).

Football position. Descriptive statistics were also employed to examine the most influential college-choice factors of participants when focusing on their respective football position. Football position is an important consideration because the strategy to recruit a player who plays on offense versus defense may differ. Segmented samples were categorized by offense and defense. Participants who identified themselves solely as specialty position (i.e., place kicker, punter, long snapper, holder for the place kicker) were not included in the statistical analysis because the sample size was not comparable to the offense and defense samples. A mean was calculated for each of the college-choice factors based on the responses of each of the segmented football position samples. The means were then sorted in descending order, as depicted in Tables 5 and 6, to reveal the most influential college-choice factors of players who primarily play offense and defense, respectively.

Table 5

Most Influential College-Choice Factors—Respondents Playing on Offense ($n = 37$)

College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Extremely Influential
Total academic value of the college's degree	2.57 (1)	0.69	67.6
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.54 (2)	0.84	70.3
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.49 (3)	0.80	64.9
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.49 (3)	0.65	56.8
Academic reputation of the college	2.46 (5)	0.80	62.2
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.43 (6)	0.87	62.2
Degree programs and academic courses offered	2.38 (7)	0.64	45.9
Quality of the football center's facilities	2.35 (8)	0.75	48.6
Reputation of the college head coach	2.33 (9)	0.83	52.8
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.31 (10)	0.95	55.6

Note. The scale ranged from "Not Influential" (0) to "Extremely Influential" (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

Table 5 describes the results of the responses from participants who identified themselves as playing on offense. The most influential college-choice factor players who played on offense was “Total academic value of the college’s degree” ($M = 2.57$; $SD = 0.69$) followed by “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” ($M = 2.54$; $SD = 0.84$). A recurring theme also resonated within the players who played on offense, which was the factor “Opportunity to win a conference championship” ($M = 2.49$; $SD = 0.65$). Only 56.8% of players who play on offense cited “Opportunity to win a conference championship” as extremely influential; however, there was a relatively low variance ($SD = 0.67$), suggesting that these players generally agreed that winning a conference championship was at least moderately influential (more than 91% of responses).

Results from participants who identified themselves as playing defense are presented in Table 6. Responses from participants who self-identified as playing defense cited a different college-choice factor as the most influential in their college-selection process as compared to their peers on offense, which was “Reputation of the college head coach” ($M = 2.64$; $SD = 0.72$). Once again, “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” ($M = 2.63$; $SD = 0.60$) emerged as one of the top two most influential college-choice factors. An interesting observation of this segmented sample was a natural break occurring between the top two most influential college-choice factors and the third through eighth most influential college-choice factors of respondents playing defense. These results suggest the top two most influential college-choice factors were considerably more influential than the other factors. Other interesting findings from respondents playing defense were “College nightlife and social activities” ($M = 2.36$; $SD = 0.72$) and “TV and media exposure for the college, football team, and/or conference” ($M = 2.35$; $SD = 0.82$) emerged within the top ten most influential college-choice factors – both of these factors were not included in the top ten most influential college-choice factors of the other segmented samples.

Results presented in Table 7 allow for convenient comparisons between the various segmented samples. Comparisons of means and relative rankings of college-choice factors can be observed in Table 7. The first instance of meaningful differentiation between the segmented samples occurred with “Reputation of the college head coach.” For example, this college-choice factor ranked first for the respondents playing defense but ranked ninth for the respondents who played offense. Also, respondents playing defense reported three factors in their top 10 that did not make the top 10 in the other three segmented samples: “College nightlife and social activities,” “Relationship with the college head coach,” and “TV and media exposure for the college, football team, and/or conference.” Similarly, results indicated in-state respondents cited “Relationships with potential college teammates at the college” in their top ten and the other three segmented samples did not. Finally, “Academic reputation of the college” was in the top 10 most influential college-choice factors for all segmented samples except respondents playing defense.

Table 6*Most Influential College-Choice Factors—Respondents Playing on Defense (n = 37)*

College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Extremely Influential
Reputation of the college head coach	2.64 (1)	0.72	75.0
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.63 (2)	0.60	68.6
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.54 (3)	0.69	64.9
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.50 (4)	0.70	61.1
Total academic value of the college's degree	2.47 (5)	0.70	58.3
Playing in front of large crowds and/or a sold-out stadium	2.47 (5)	0.74	58.3
Location of the college (town, city, and/or state)	2.43 (7)	0.73	56.8
Opportunity to win a national championship	2.39 (8)	0.80	55.6
College nightlife and social activities	2.36 (9)	0.72	50.0
Relationship with the college head coach	2.35 (10)	0.79	51.4
TV and media exposure for the college, football team, and/or conference	2.35 (10)	0.82	54.1
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.35 (10)	0.95	59.5

Note. The scale ranged from "Not Influential" (0) to "Extremely Influential" (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

Qualitative Analysis of Most Influential College-Choice Factors

Figure 1 focuses specifically on process code 1: Developing Relationships. Across the data set, the majority of participants discussed the importance of developing relationships during the college experience. Three specific spheres of influence pertaining to personal relationship-building were (a) position coach, (b) head coach, and (c) teammates. Playing time, transition support, and motivation were pattern codes that emerged as desired factors of these future relationships.

Figure 2 focuses specifically on process code 2: Ensuring Competitive Edge. Across the data set the majority of participants discussed the importance of not only developing relationships with position coaches, the head coach, and teammates, but the clear importance of entering a competitive structure that would prepare them for post-season and post-college success. Subsequently, three specific spheres of influence pertaining to college reputation contributed to their college choice: (a) postseason competition, (b) NFL draft, and (c) academic rigor. Media attention, quality of collective experience, and career development were pattern codes that emerged as desired factors of this future institution.

Table 7*Comparison of Segmented Samples*

	All Respondents (<i>N</i> = 74)	In-state (<i>n</i> = 32)	Out-of-state (<i>n</i> = 42)	Offense (<i>n</i> = 37)	Defense (<i>n</i> = 37)
College-Choice Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>
Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football	2.58 (1)	2.66 (1)	2.52 (2)	2.54 (2)	2.63 (2)
Total academic value of the college's degree	2.52 (2)	2.50 (5)	2.54 (1)	2.57 (1)	2.47 (5)
Opportunity to win a conference championship	2.51 (3)	2.53 (4)	2.50 (3)	2.49 (3)	2.54 (3)
Reputation of the college head coach	2.49 (4)	2.47 (6)	2.50 (3)	2.33 (9)	2.64 (1)
Opportunity to play in a bowl game	2.47 (5)	2.63 (2)	2.34 (9)	2.43 (6)	2.50 (4)
Relationship with your potential college position coach(es)	2.41 (6)	2.34 (11)	2.45 (5)	2.49 (3)	2.32 (15)
Academic reputation of the college	2.39 (7)	2.47 (6)	2.33 (10)	2.46 (5)	2.31 (17)
Degree programs and academic courses offered	2.36 (8)	2.42 (9)	2.31 (11)	2.38 (7)	2.33 (14)
Opportunity to win a national championship	2.33 (9)	2.31 (12)	2.35 (8)	2.28 (11)	2.39 (8)
Playing in front of large crowds and/or a sold-out stadium	2.33 (9)	2.37 (10)	2.29 (12)	2.19 (13)	2.47 (5)
Increased chances of playing professional football	2.33 (9)	2.28 (15)	2.37 (7)	2.31 (10)	2.35 (10)
***	***	***	***	***	***
Location of the college (town, city, and/or state)	2.26 (13)	2.63 (2)	1.98 (28)	2.08 (21)	2.43 (7)
Relationships with potential college teammates at the college	2.22 (17)	2.47 (6)	2.02 (22)	2.11 (19)	2.32 (15)
Quality of the football center's facilities	2.30 (12)	2.19 (19)	2.38 (6)	2.35 (8)	2.24 (22)
College nightlife and social activities	2.14 (19)	2.16 (23)	2.12 (17)	1.92 (31)	2.36 (9)
Relationship with the college head coach	2.18 (18)	2.19 (19)	2.17 (16)	2.00 (23)	2.35 (10)
TV and media exposure for the college, football team, and/or conference	2.23 (16)	2.16 (23)	2.29 (13)	2.11 (20)	2.35 (10)

Note. The scale ranged from "Not Influential" (0) to "Extremely Influential" (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the rankings of the mean scores

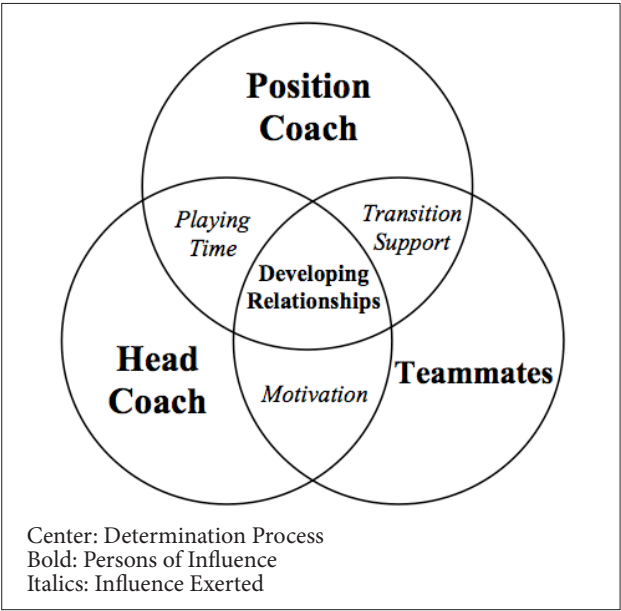


Figure 1. Spheres of Influence–Developing Relationships

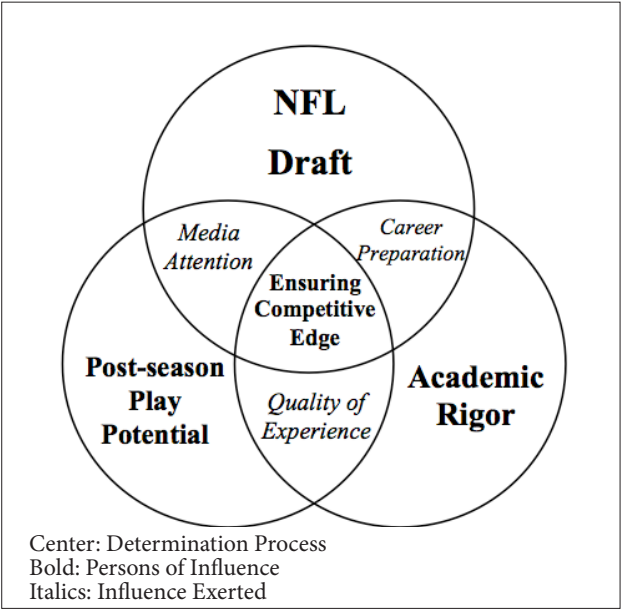


Figure 2. Spheres of Influence–Ensuring Competitive Edge

Discussion

A mixed-methodological approach provides a supplementary perspective that was lacking in previous studies. Also, this study offered a cross-section of FBS football players by examining college-choice factors based on residency status and position, which was also lacking in the literature.

A Glimpse into Unique Perspectives

Each prospective intercollegiate athlete is a unique human being with unique life circumstances and preferences. However, specific patterns have emerged which inform the recruiting process and holistic development needs.

Residency status (in-state vs. out-of-state perspectives). Results illustrated the value of developing relationships during the recruiting process. However, evidence supported the pattern that in-state prospects have a greater propensity for relationships with teammates whereas out-of-state prospects are more influenced by relationships with the coaching staff. Another phenomenon that existed was in-state prospects were more influenced by long-term nonathletic labor market, whereas out-of-state prospects were more focused on the short-term professional football labor market. These patterns suggest out-of-state prospects may have a greater affinity to derive their competitive edge from athletically related factors than their in-state peers. **Football position (offense vs. defense perspectives).** The patterns emerging among football position offered unique insights. For the players who played a position on offense, they were most influenced by academically related factors (such as degree programs and academic courses offered; total academic value; academic reputation) than all other peer groupings. Therefore, staff involved in the recruiting process for prospects playing offense at the intercollegiate level would be wise to emphasize the role of academic rigor, quality of student-athlete experience. On the other hand, prospects who matriculate the play on the defensive side of the ball voiced more socially related preferences than the other segmented groups (e.g., playing in front of large crowds; location of the college; college nightlife and social activities; TV and media exposure).

Spheres of Influence

The thrust of this study's applicability is centered on the role of career development programming, within the holistic personal development framework, to maximize one's perceived Lifetime Human Capital. Athletic department personnel can utilize the responses from these intercollegiate football players as a foundation to invest in Lifetime Human Capital by developing relationships (process code 1; Figure 1) and ensuring competitive edge (process code 2; Figure 2). Understanding specific preferences of prospective intercollegiate athletes and relating these factors to the importance of relationships and competitive edge is presumed to accelerate and sustain the Lifetime Human Capital Cycle (Apostolopoulou, 2002; Canale, Dunlap, Britt, & Donahue, 1996; Davis & Van Dusen, 1975; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Mixon et al., 2004).

This research presents strong rationale for coaches to implement and market a structure that allows and encourages their athletes to differentiate themselves beyond the athletic realm. Personal and professional development is fostered when athletic programs offer authentic holistic development. Three practical outcomes from this study regarding holistic development include (a) linking the role of academic rigor to ensuring a long-term competitive edge in the broader labor market, (b) fostering relationships that encourage mentoring and accountability in regard to transitioning into a nonathletic career trajectory, and (c) acknowledging and leveraging unique social opportunities to complement the academic and athletic roles of student-athletes to ensure an overall satisfactory experience.

Furthermore, results clearly depict both athletics and academic factors are internally negotiated when selecting a college, but the prominence of career development is brightly illuminated as a desired college-choice factor. Coaches, teammates, and athletics personnel are quick to build relationships (process code 1; Figure 1) and emphasize a perceived competitive edge (process code 2; Figure 2) athletically and academically; however, this approach is myopic and stops short of the end goal of linking to of successful professional/career development, which is a force maximizing intercollegiate athletes' perceived Lifetime Human Capital (Dumond et al., 2008; Johnson, Jubenville, & Goss, 2009; Kotler, 2004; Lawlor, 1998).

A philosophical shift that values career development (as a component of personal and professional holistic development programming) requires a commitment to the long-term welfare of intercollegiate athletes rather than a short-sighted emphasis on athletic winning. All athletic playing careers end. This bears repeating: All athletic playing careers end. An athlete's retirement can be voluntary (e.g., announcement following a 15-year career) or involuntarily (e.g., not making a final roster), and some playing careers end earlier and/or more abruptly than others (e.g., due to injury). Therefore, framing career development as a "next career" or "second career" rather than a "Plan B" is presumed to be more effective to encourage holistic personal development. This subtle adjustment in vocabulary sends the message that one's athletic pursuits are valued, yet life beyond sport is inevitable and one should prepare himself/herself accordingly.

If you've ever stepped foot inside football facilities at a school competing at the FBS level, you will undoubtedly observe displays of pictures and statistics of alumni who have excelled at the professional level. While this common strategy is justified according to the results of this study, sport programs that wish to truly differentiate themselves from peer programs in the marketplace would also display pictures and statistics of alumni excelling in their "next career." Consequently, the results from this study led the researchers to construct a paradigm known as the "Lifetime Human Capital Cycle."

Begin With the End in Mind: Introducing the Lifetime Human Capital Cycle

The first dimension of the Lifetime Human Capital Cycle is “Enhanced image and reputation of the university/sport program.” Virtually any organization would voice a desire to have an enhanced public image and reputation. However, this desire is easier said than done, which requires a commitment to shared values as well as an investment of time and resources. Nonetheless, investment carries the connotation of “return,” and an investment into holistic personal and professional development of intercollegiate athletes is expected to produce the desired outcome of an enhanced public image and reputation of the university and/or sport program.

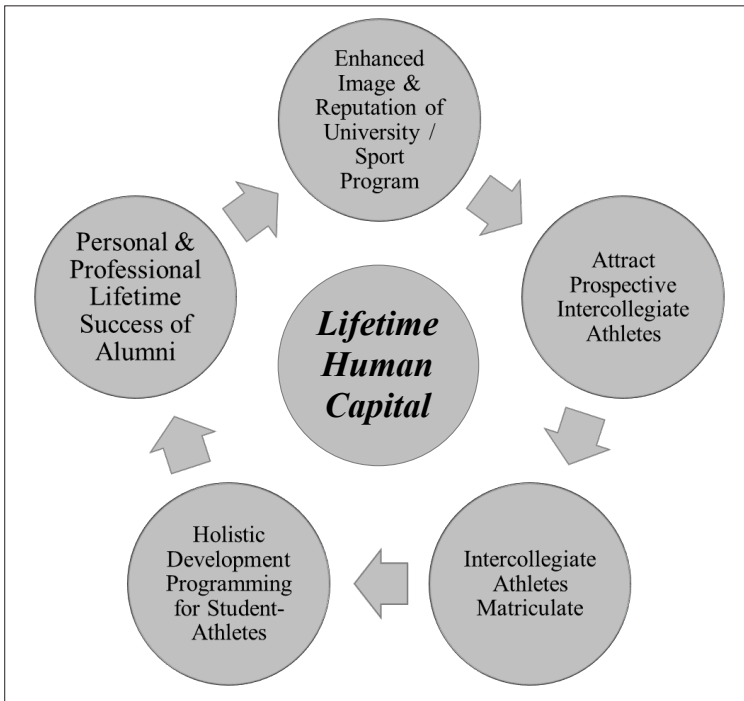


Figure 3. Lifetime Human Capital Cycle

For instance, a university with a favorably reputable sport program will attract prospective intercollegiate athletes to visit the school during the recruiting process. If meaningful relationships are fostered and there is a perceived competitive edge then it is expected that the individual will matriculate at the university. Once at the university a holistic development structure should be implemented to follow-through on the “competitive edge” promised during the recruiting process. Finally, these individuals will have the liberty to pursue a professional athletic career (should he/she desire), but more importantly be prepared for life after their athletic playing career ends. The narrative will quickly reflect successful alumni,

both athletically and otherwise, which will enhance the image and reputation of the university and sport program, and the cycle will repeat itself. By emphasizing excellence in alumni's "next" careers, this would enhance the perceived Lifetime Human Capital to prospective athletes, essentially beginning with the end in mind.

Investing in holistic development programs are likely to begin and sustain a perpetuating cycle of (a) graduating successful alumni who achieve personal and professional lifetime success; which (b) enhances the brands of the sport program, athletic department, and institution; which (c) attracts recruits; who (d) engage in holistic development programming; and (e) achieve personal and professional lifetime success.

Future Research

There are numerous opportunities for future research regarding the college-choice factors of prospective intercollegiate athletes. An extension of the research would be to survey football players at additional institutions which would provide a larger sample size and diverse perspectives from a variety of participants in different settings. Broadening the sample size would allow the researcher to make comparative analyses between athletes at different colleges, athletic conferences, and intercollegiate divisions and associations. Similarly, comparisons could be made regarding the differences in the most influential college-choice factors when focusing on differences in gender.

Also, a longitudinal study could be employed to survey incoming intercollegiate athlete, and an exit questionnaire could investigate the overall intercollegiate athlete experience and preparation for life after sports. An additional avenue could focus on what athletic department personnel perceive to be the most influential college-choice factors of intercollegiate athletes. If an identical list of college-choice factors was administered to intercollegiate athletes and athletic department personnel alike, research could evaluate whether staff are aware of and meeting the preferences and expectations of their intercollegiate athletes.

Currently, the explicit dimensions of the Lifetime Human Capital Cycle supported by empirical evidence is "attracting prospective intercollegiate athletes" and "intercollege athletes matriculate." Therefore, future research could investigate the other implicitly supported dimensions of the Lifetime Human Capital Cycle, including brand equity of a sport program, effective holistic development models, and narratives of successful alumni.

Limitations

It is necessary to identify the limitations of this study. First, this research was exploratory in nature meaning since this study only surveyed one team at one university it is not intended to be generalizable to all NCAA Division I FBS football players. Additionally, when this study was conducted, the directions instructed participants to recall and retroactively rate the degree of influence of each college-choice factor. This was deemed a limitation since some of the participants were

years removed from their college-selection process and their recall may not be as accurate due to the amount of time that passed, and athletes may have experienced a phenomenon known as social expectation bias which essentially suggests participants responded how they think they are expected to answer. Nonetheless, it was assumed that the participants responded to the questions honestly and accurately according to the instructions on the questionnaire. Furthermore, conference affiliation and region can present as a limitation. A college community in the southeastern United States is likely to hold traditions and values which differentiate it from other geographical regions in the United States. These unique southeastern characteristics may attract and/or repel a particular type of individual which is a limitation of this study design.

Conclusion

A successful athletic department adds value to a college, but it is critical that “success” be defined by individual institutions, whether it comes in the form of winning records, championships, academic achievement, fiscal responsibility, holistic development programming, and/or successful alumni (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016; Lawlor, 1998). Athletic department personnel who utilize the results of this study are expected to enhance efficiency in the expensive and time-consuming recruiting process by assuming a more macro perspective by highlighting alumni’s nonathletically related success and linking this to meaningful holistic development opportunities facilitated by the athletic department.

Although the high-stakes culture of intercollegiate athletics lends itself to coaches feeling pressured to adopt a “win-at-all-costs” mentality, athletic department personnel must not lose the focus of holistically developing college students personally and professionally. Athletic department personnel serve as instrumental mentors to their intercollegiate athletes and should strive to add value to their athletes’ holistic development, which ultimately enhances their overall perceived Lifetime Human Capital (Dumond et al., 2008). Investing in holistic development programs is a critical spoke in the Lifetime Human Capital cycle that helps sustain a perpetuating cycle of graduating alumni who place a high value on their college experience which enhances the brands of the sport program, athletic department, and institution.

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