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Enhancing Athletic Programs' Recruitment Success

A Strategic Planning Model of Recruiting

Sean Dwyer

Abstract

A critical yet understudied element in recruiting success is understanding an athletic program's strengths and weaknesses relative to influential college choice factors. The purpose of this study is to provide practitioners and researchers with a new approach to assess an athletic program's recruiting process, improve its effectiveness and efficiency, and close the gap between what student-athletes desire in an athletic program and what the program offers. To achieve that end, collegiate football players ($N = 66$) at a NCAA FBS school were surveyed using a scale consolidated from past college choice factor scholarship. Exploratory factor analysis using principle-component analysis and Varimax rotation was then used to assess the underlying factor structure of the proposed scale and the commonalities among the 48 scale items. From the results, a strategic recruiting model was created that categorizes college choice factors into a four-quadrant matrix consisting of Urgency, Strength, Support, and Concern components.

Keywords: *College choice factors, intercollegiate athletics, management, organizational behavior, sport performance*

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Introduction

The recruitment of skilled student-athletes lies at the heart of success in college athletics (Magnusen et al., 2014b). Though recruiting success can enhance universities' visibility, image, and fund-raising efforts (Judson et al., 2004), competition to attract desired student-athletes has increased considerably, particularly at the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level (Huffman et al., 2016). It is thus critical that athletic programs identify the selection criteria that drive student-athletes' college choice decision-making. With this knowledge, emphasis can be placed on those aspects of the recruiting process that matter most to student-athletes, thus enhancing recruiting success (Pauline et al., 2007; Magnusen et al., 2014a; Magnusen et al., 2014b).

Intercollegiate student-athlete recruiting research has examined the specific wants and needs of student-athletes for over 35 years. This research has focused on key college choice factors and the importance student-athletes place on them. However, these studies have largely examined only one side of the recruiting dyad. A second and equally critical element in recruiting success is understanding how an athletic program is performing across these college choice factors in the minds of student-athletes. Unfortunately, the performance evaluation of athletic programs in this regard has not been examined, leaving a gap in athletic programs' abilities to enhance recruiting effectiveness.

The current study extends and complements past college choice factor research (e.g., Pauline et al., 2007; Magnusen et al., 2014b) by exploring the importance student-athletes place on key college choice factors (e.g., academics, reputation) relative to athletic programs' performances across these factors. Specifically, a conceptual framework is introduced that categorizes, assesses, and prioritizes athletic programs' strategic planning efforts with regard to the recruiting process. This model provides coaches and administrators with a practical guide to meet student-athlete needs, not merely identify these needs. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to provide practitioners and researchers with a methodology to assess an athletic program's recruiting process, improve its effectiveness and efficiency, and close the gap between what student-athletes desire in a program and what the athletic program offers.

Conceptual Framework

The recruiting process is the focus of this study, with emphasis being placed on two key areas: (1) student-athletes and their needs and (2) the athletic program and its resources. Two theories inform the conceptual framework. Strategic marketing theory frames the former area whereas a resource-based view of the firm frames the latter area.

Strategic marketing theory is grounded in the marketing concept, an organization-level business principle that links the achievement of organizational goals with meeting customers' needs and wants (Kotler & Levy, 1969; Saxe & Weitz,

1982). Organizations that follow the marketing concept are said to be market oriented and engage in market research to identify customer needs (Day, 1994; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). While a market orientation does not guarantee organizational success (Kumar et al., 2011), it is difficult to impossible to achieve high levels of performance without it in today's competitive environment (Frosen et al., 2016).

A market orientation implemented at the individual level is known as customer-orientation (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). Customer-oriented organizations adopt the personal selling concept (Szymanski, 1988), which means they focus on meeting not only customers' product needs (the "what") but also customers' selling-related, sales process needs (the "how"). Implicit in this focus on customer needs is the necessity of communicating and promoting those things in which customers have an interest and placing far less (or no) emphasis on those things in which customers have little interest. A competitive advantage can be achieved by taking a customer-oriented approach and aligning sales presentations to meet customers' prioritized needs (Szymanski, 1988).

A marketing orientation connects to recruiting in several ways. Specifically, the implication of this discussion with regard to recruiting intercollegiate student-athletes is two-fold: (1) student-athletes should be viewed as customers by athletic programs seeking to recruit them (Johnson et al., 2009); and (2) a product offering in the form of a university and its athletic program is a complex, multifaceted "cluster of satisfactions" (Manning et al., 2015). As such, a customer orientation should be adopted by athletic programs so that the focus is placed on identifying the specific needs of student-athletes, constructing product offerings to meet those needs, and subsequently presenting effective and efficient marketing communications to promote the offering. Doing so should enhance recruiting and, ultimately, athletic program success (Magnusen et al., 2014b).

The resource-based view of the firm provides a theoretical framework with which the "seller" in this buyer-seller dyad (i.e., the athletic program) can be examined. The resource-based view is one in which an organization's performance—in the current discussion, recruiting success—is seen to be primarily influenced by its resources (Barney, 1991). These resources include tangible assets such as stadium and practice facilities as well as intangible assets such as a program's winning history and the head coach's reputation. Related resources include organizations' skills (e.g., coaching effectiveness) as well as capabilities such as student-athlete recruiting. An organization can achieve competitive advantage to the extent that it can harness and leverage resources that are rare, provide superior value to customers, and are difficult to imitate (e.g., program history, shared experiences of the coaching staff).

The value organizations provide their customers can be measured in several ways. Marketing performance measurement is a management process that measures organizational performance against marketing goals. These goals can be financial (e.g., profits), competitor-focused (e.g., market share), or customer-based (e.g., satisfaction), among others. Marketing performance measurement systems

are considered critical in linking marketing activities to business success. Notably, the combination of a market orientation and marketing performance measurement has been shown to enhance value creation as well as overall organizational performance (Frosen et al., 2016).

Taken together, strategic marketing theory and the resource-based view of the firm suggest that it is incumbent on organizations to effectively and efficiently utilize their resources to create value for customers based on the specific benefits customers seek. This implies a prioritization of efforts (i.e., focusing on those “things” that customers most value and de-emphasizing what customers do not value) that are linked to a utilization of resources with which the organization has expertise, experience, and access. By achieving these goals, organizations are more likely to meet, if not exceed, the expectations of their customers. However, to do so an organization must assess performance and therein lies a problem with previous college choice factor research. With limited exceptions, the extant literature on college choice factors and recruiting lacks such an assessment.

Summary of College Choice Factor Research

College choice factor research has primarily focused on the importance that student-athletes place on key decision variables in the recruiting process (Magnussen et al., 2014b). This research on intercollegiate student-athletes evolved from research about the general student population (cf. Martin & Dixon, 1991). Early student-athlete studies used a variety of methodologies to assess college choice decision-making. These studies included fixed-response surveys (e.g., Mathes & Gurny, 1985), scenario approaches (Doyle & Gaeth, 1990), and laddering techniques (Finley & Fountain, 2008; Klenosky et al., 2001), to name a few.

In an early approach from the late 1990s, Gabert et al. (1999) introduced the 23-item Student-Athlete College Choice Profile (SACCP) scale based on interviews with athletic department personnel. The SACCP was employed in several subsequent studies (e.g., Goss et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2009; Letawsky et al., 2003), and was often modified with new and updated factors. Researchers (e.g., Judson et al., 2004; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007; Pauline et al., 2007) also constructed their own scales based in part on previous survey instruments. Notable advancements in the development of college choice factor instruments included Popp et al.’s (2011) 39-factor instrument built on empirical studies dating back to 1985, and Huffman and Cooper’s (2012) 61-factor scale that captured additional factors specific to football recruiting.

Methodology

Though the previously developed tools used to measure college choice are helpful, a way of better assessing recruiting effectiveness needs to be done to facilitate a more comprehensive strategic planning process for student-athlete recruiting. Accordingly, in this study, past college choice factor studies focusing on recruiting factor importance were consolidated and expanded to include a performance measure.

Instrument Development

The instrument used to test the proposed strategic planning model was developed via a methodology employed by Popp et al. (2011). First, an extensive literature review was conducted of college choice factor studies published in the last 35 years, relevant college choice factors were compiled and a composite instrument was developed. A panel of several experts were employed to evaluate the instrument through a series of personal interviews. Interviews were held with an FBS head coach, several student-athletes, and a FBS head recruiting coordinator whose sole coaching duty was recruiting. Personal interviews were conducted instead of paper-and-pencil evaluation forms because of their advantage of eliciting in-depth insights and feedback. The panel of experts evaluated the factors for face validity, making suggestions and a small number of minor adjustments. The instrument was then reviewed by a small sample of research professionals for clarity and understanding. A current team member (not in the final sample) completed the survey and provided additional comments. Finally, the instrument was closely scrutinized by a second FBS head recruiting coordinator for relevance, coverage, and applicability, providing a measure of content validity. From this process the final instrument, inclusive of 48-items, was generated.

Participants

A paper-and-pencil survey method was used to assess a team of student-athletes' perceptions of their recruiting process experience. For the college choice items, student-athletes were asked, "How important and influential was each factor below to your choice of school?" Participants responded on a 7-point, Likert-type scale anchored by "Not at All Influential" and "Extremely Influential."

The participants were then asked, across the same factors, "Now that you have considered what was most important to you in choosing a university, next indicate how [university name] and its football program rated in each of these areas compared to others schools that recruited you." Participants responded on a 7-point, Likert-type scale anchored by "[university name] Rated Low" and "[university name] Rated High."

Questionnaires were distributed on the first day of pre-season practice to 84 Football Bowl Division (FBS) players from a mid-west university, all of whom were scholarship recipients. Sixty-six players elected to complete the survey, including first-year players, resulting in a response rate of 79%.

Data Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis using principle-component analysis and Varimax rotation was used to assess the underlying factor structure of the proposed scale and the commonalities among the 48 scale items. The final model retained forty-five scale items (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$), resulting in a nine-factor solution that accounted for 75.9% of the variance in student-athlete college choice. This

outcome compares favorably with past college choice factor analyses (e.g., 49.3%, Popp et al., 2011).

Appendix 1 lists the nine factors derived from the analysis (column 1). Factor means are found in parentheses. The questionnaire items (column 2) and their respective college choice factor labels (column 3) are presented with the factor on which they most heavily loaded.

The reduction of the items into nine factors adds value to the study of student-athlete recruiting. Similar to any classification process in the sciences, grouping items into categories aids in organizing them, simplifies their understanding, makes comparison of items within and between categories easier and more insightful, and enhances their examination and interpretation. Notably, the nine factors/categories were presented to one of the recruiting coordinators participating in the study for relevance, applicability, and validation. The coach confirmed that the categories accurately represented the recruiting process, providing a measure of support for the construct validity of the scale (Kerlinger, 1986).

Results

Table 1 lists the college choice factors ranked by the level of personal importance the student-athletes placed on them. For example, *Reputation of the Strength Coach* was most important with an importance level of 5.95. Using a median split, a *t*-test was completed to assess the differences between the more highly rated college choice factors and the lower-rated factors. A significant difference was found between the two groups ($t=8.97, p=.002$). As such, the more highly rated college choice factors (ranked 1 through 20) were labeled “Most Important” factors and lower-rated factors (ranked 22 through 41) were designated “Least Important” factors as noted in Table 1.

The players’ rating of their current football program’s factors is displayed in the next column.¹ The program rating is 5.89 for Reputation of the Strength Coach, 0.06 less than the personal importance. This difference is found in the last column entitled Difference. This rating differential indicates the athletic program’s rating fell slightly short of the importance level for this factor.

A Strategic Planning Model of Recruiting

Strategic marketing theory and practice suggest that organizations engage in two key processes to achieve high levels of performance: a market orientation and a formal system of performance measurement (Frosen et al., 2016). These processes were operationalized in the current study by examining college choice factor importance and an athletic program’s performance across these factors as rated by student-athletes in a focal program. The results were then organized into a strategic planning model of recruiting.

¹The four Personal Influence factors found in Appendix 1 are not included in Table 1. These items were rated by student-athletes for their importance but were excluded from the performance ratings in the questionnaire because the athletic program exerts no control over these factors.

A Strategic Planning Model of Recruiting

Table 1

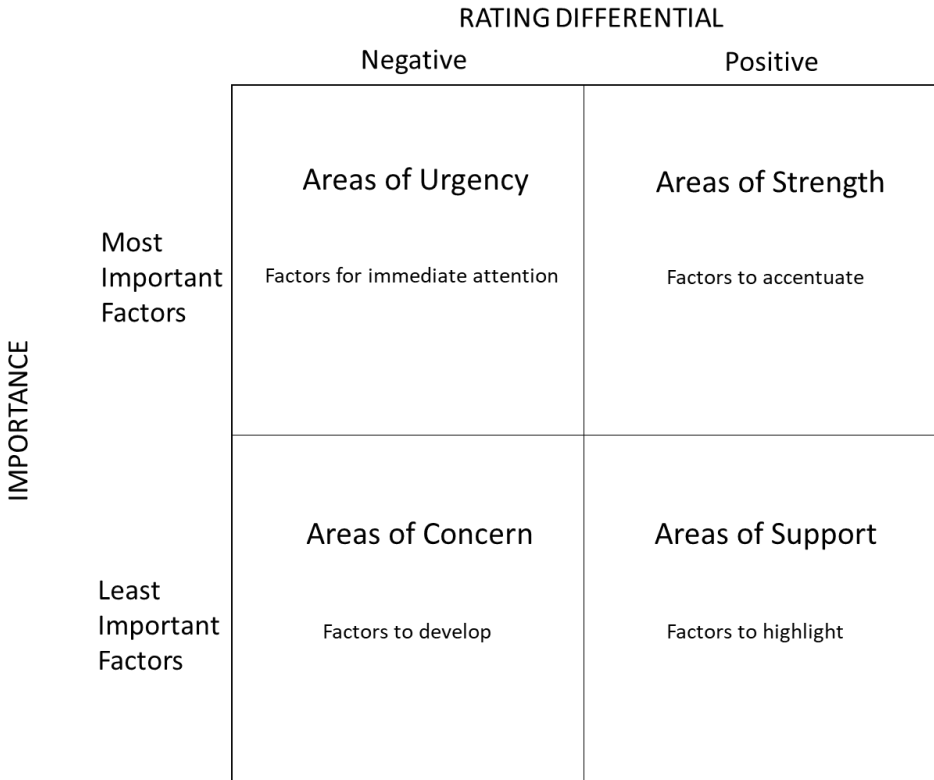
College Choice Factor Importance and Rating

RANK	COLLEGE-CHOICE FACTOR		IMPORTANCE	RATING	DIFFERENCE
1	Reputation of strength coach		5.95	5.89	-0.06
2	Championship and bowl games		5.63	5.31	-0.32
3	Weight training facilities		5.61	5.50	-0.11
4	Reputation of head coach	M	5.59	5.67	0.08
5	Competitive national schedule	O	5.58	4.97	-0.62
6	Opportunity to earn degree	S	5.56	5.38	-0.19
7	Graduation rate of players	T	5.54	5.33	-0.21
8	Former players in NFL		5.54	5.28	-0.26
9	Playing professional football	I	5.52	5.08	-0.44
10	Reputation of position coach	M	5.50	5.69	0.19
11	Opportunity to play right away	P	5.46	5.08	-0.38
12	Program reputation/success	O	5.43	5.45	0.02
13	Career opportunities	R	5.39	5.42	0.03
14	Degree programs offered	T	5.38	5.39	0.01
15	Relationship with position coach	A	5.35	5.31	-0.04
16	College/department reputation	N	5.35	5.34	0.00
17	University academic reputation	T	5.33	5.30	-0.04
18	Relationship with strength coach		5.33	5.25	-0.08
19	Recent win/loss record		5.32	5.55	0.23
20	Practice and training facilities		5.30	5.06	-0.24
21	Relationship with team members	\bar{X}	5.29	5.25	-0.04
22	Relationship w recruiting coach		5.25	5.30	0.05
23	Locker room/players lounge		5.23	5.16	-0.07
24	Reputation of conference	L	5.22	4.92	-0.29
25	Relationship with head coach	E	5.17	5.20	0.02
26	Game day experience	A	5.17	4.84	-0.33
27	Football stadium	S	5.17	5.03	-0.14
28	Official campus visit	T	5.11	5.08	-0.03
29	Academic support staff		5.00	4.77	-0.23
30	National media exposure	I	4.94	4.78	-0.16
31	Academic support center	M	4.89	4.68	-0.21
32	Unofficial campus visit	P	4.79	4.97	0.18
33	Football recruiting material	O	4.74	4.87	0.13
34	Football social media marketing	R	4.72	4.87	0.15
35	Campus housing	T	4.69	4.73	0.04
36	University recruiting material	A	4.66	5.03	0.38
37	School social life	N	4.47	4.50	0.03
38	Size of university	T	4.45	4.56	0.11
39	Location of university		4.42	4.58	0.15
40	Attractiveness of campus		4.38	4.66	0.28
41	Meal plan		4.34	4.27	-0.08

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model grounded in strategic marketing theory and the resource-based view of the firm. The model's purpose is to provide strategic guidance and prescriptive insight to recruiters. The model is based on student-athletes' perceptions of the importance of specific college choice factors in their decision-making along with their rating of the athletic program across each respective college choice factor. An instrument is also offered in this study as an example to assess these perceptions. What is more, athletic programs can augment and modify the proposed scale to fit their specific situations and needs.

The proposed model is organized by first categorizing college choice factors by the relative importance placed on the factors by student-athletes. Two groups, Most Important Factors and Least Important Factors as demarcated and noted in Table 1, are displayed in Figure 1 on the y-axis that measures *Importance*. Next, factors are categorized by the difference between their importance and their respective ratings as found in Table 1. *Rating Differential* is found on the x-axis and is composed of two groups, Negative and Positive rating differentials. These two

Figure 1
Strategic Planning Model of Recruiting



categories, Importance and Rating Differential, combine to form the four-quadrant matrix presented in Figure 1.

Areas of Strength

These are factors considered important and possessing ratings exceeding their respective importance level—a positive differential. These are located in the upper-right quadrant and include factors such as record, career opportunities, and the reputation of the position coach.

Areas of Support

Though still relevant and worth consideration, these are less important factors for which the rating differentials are still positive. These are in the lower-right quadrant and include factors such as the attractiveness of the campus, unofficial campus visits, and social media marketing.

Areas of Urgency

Factors considered important to student-athletes but that have negative rating differentials are found in the upper-left quadrant. These factors should be dealt with immediately (to the extent that the athletic program has the resources and ability to improve them). This quadrant includes factors such as recruit opportunity to play and the competitiveness of the national schedule.

Areas of Concern

This quadrant represents factors of least importance for which negative rating differentials exist. Though these factors should not be ignored, they are of lower importance to the student-athletes. Thus, they should be developed and enhanced on a medium- to long-term basis as resources allow. These are located in the bottom-left quadrant and include factors such as game day experience, conference reputation, and national media exposure.

Responsiveness

The concept of *responsiveness*, which represents an organization's propensity to act based on knowledge gained (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993), strategically ties marketing orientation and marketing performance measurement to performance. Responsiveness is an integral element of organizational success. In fact, a market orientation, marketing performance measurement, and responsiveness can combine to create a unique strategic resource and competitive advantage for organizations (Hult et al., 2005).

Though responsiveness is important for achieving success in all four quadrants of this model, it is especially critical for the last two quadrants. Areas of Urgency and Areas of Concern comprise factors that have negative rating differentials. Ideally, organizations should be highly responsive to enhancing factors in both. Yet, in a context of constrained resources (e.g., assets, personnel, time) that characterizes many organizations, these entities must recognize the difference between

urgent tasks and important tasks (Boyes, 2018). According, the proposed model distinguishes the prioritization of responses necessitated by limited resources.

Practical Implications of the Recruiting Model

The model introduced in this study is conceptual and exploratory. This study's empirical results were utilized to test its application and practical relevance. Figure 2 further advances the original model found in Figure 1. Key findings, provided as small charts within the model, illustrate the model's practical guidance in promoting their programs and in prioritizing their efforts. For example, with Areas of Strength, the largest, positive differential among the most important factors was *Recent win/loss record*. The personal importance placed on this factor by the student-athletes of 5.32 was less than the factor rating of 5.55, a difference of 0.23 as indicated in Table 1. This college choice factor and the four factors following it exceeded the student-athletes' expectation levels.

Collectively, Figure 2 integrates the empirical results and conceptual model to present a graphical framework that serves to guide recruiters in terms of promoting their athletic program and enhancing it. For example, the Areas of Strength indicate the program would be well served to promote its record of success and reputation along with the reputation of its coaches. The program's marketing strategy should be two-pronged, with focus placed on both athletics and academics (particularly emphasizing career opportunities the athletic program and university offer). These five college choice factors should be accentuated throughout the recruiting cycle.

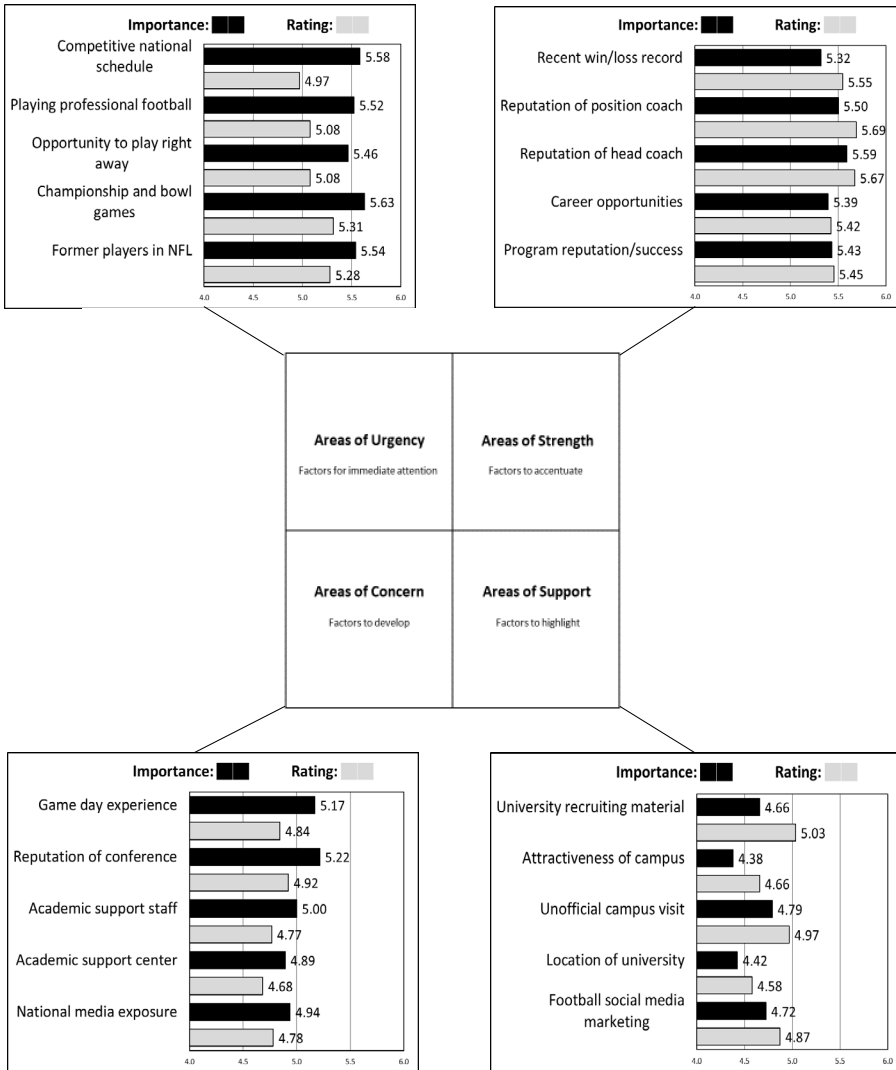
Consider the factors as well within the Areas of Support quadrant. Though, these college choice factors are relatively unimportant to the student-athletes, they should be highlighted during conversations and communications with recruits. However, minimal time and effort should be expended in doing so. For example, while campus and area tours are typically appropriate for visiting recruits, the results in this quadrant suggest that in-depth tours of the area would not be a productive use of time, particularly during time-constrained official campus visits.

Limitations and Future Research

The objective of this study was to introduce and test a methodology for enhancing athletic programs' recruiting process. As such, it was exploratory in nature and has inherent limitations that await future research. Missing from this study as well as the extant research on the student-athlete recruiting is a key element of marketing strategy: competition. Providing value to customers in an absolute sense is vital ("Our product has value"), but to achieve a relative competitive advantage the value must be superior to the competition ("Our product offers the most value"). Future student-athlete recruiting research should assess athletic programs' college choice factor performance relative to its competition (e.g., teams in its conference and/or region).

Figure 2

An Application of the Strategic Planning Model for Recruiting



The strategic model presented in this study also offers insight into improving athletic programs' lower rated college choice factors. Still, programs have little or no control over certain factors, such as degree programs offered, college/department reputation, and university academic reputation. This limits this study's practicality to a degree. As well, the model presented in this study was tested with only a single athletic program. Thus, the findings and its generalizability should be interpreted with caution. Future research should evaluate the model across other institutions and sports.

Conclusion

The results presented in this study contribute to the intercollegiate student-athlete recruiting research literature in several ways. This study replicated and supported past empirical research by focusing on the importance placed on college choice factors by student-athletes in making college choice decisions. This study also extends previous recruiting research by presenting and testing a means of assessing athletic programs' recruiting performance. This extension to college choice factor research provides new insights into the strengths of a recruiting program as well as its potential weaknesses.

An additional contribution of this study was the conceptualization and application of a framework to assess and enhance recruiting practices. Guided by strategic marketing theory and a resource-based view of the firm, a strategic planning model for recruiting was presented. This study's college choice factor importance and performance results were applied to test the model. The outcomes provided both prescriptive insight into the recruiting process and practical implications for enhancing it. Support was thus found for the added value that performance data can provide athletic programs.

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Appendix 1 – Recruiting Categories, Factors, and Items

FACTOR/ CATEGORY	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	COLLEGE-CHOICE FACTOR
Reputation (\bar{x} = 5.56)	Reputation of strength coach	Reputation Of Strength Coach
	Reputation of position coach	Reputation Of Position Coach
	Reputation of head coach	Reputation Of Head Coach
Academics (\bar{x} = 5.43)	Recent win/loss record	Recent Win/Loss Record
	Football program reputation and history of program's success	Program Reputation/Success
	Career opportunities other than/after professional football	Career Opportunities
	Degree programs, majors, and/or courses offered by the university	Degree Programs Offered
	Opportunity to earn a degree while balancing football responsibilities	Opportunity To Earn Degree
Opportunity (\bar{x} = 5.38)	Academic reputation of the college, department, or major of your choice	College/Department Reputation
	Graduation rate of players	Graduation Rate Of Players
	Overall academic reputation of the university	University Academic Reputation
	Opportunity to play in conference championships and/or bowl games	Championship And Bowl Games
	Increased chance of playing professional football	Former Players In NFL
Facilities (\bar{x} = 5.33)	Opportunity to play right away (openings at my position)	Opportunity To Play Right Away
	Former players being drafted, signing with, and/or playing for NFL teams	Playing Professional Football
	Playing a competitive national schedule against top teams	Competitive National Schedule
	National reputation of football conference and its member schools	Reputation Of Conference
	Game day experience – tailgate environment, fan atmosphere, attendance	Game Day Experience
Relationships (\bar{x} = 5.18)	National media exposure of team -- TV and other media	National Media Exposure
	Weight training facilities and equipment	Weight Training Facilities
	Locker room and players lounge	Locker Room/Players Lounge
	Practice and training facilities – practice field, meeting rooms, training	Practice And Training Facilities
	The football stadium	Football Stadium
Support (\bar{x} = 4.73)	Relationship with position coach developed during recruiting	Relationship With Position Coach
	Relationship with recruiting coach developed during recruiting	Relationship W Recruiting Coach
	Relationship with strength coach developed during recruiting	Relationship With Strength Coach
	Relationship with team members developed during recruiting	Relationship With Team Members
	Relationship with head coach developed during recruiting	Relationship With Head Coach
Marketing (\bar{x} = 4.71)	Official campus visit	Official Campus Visit
	Unofficial campus visit (leave blank if no such visit)	Unofficial Campus Visit
	Student-athlete academic support staff and services	Academic Support Staff
	Quality and type of campus housing available to you (dorms, apartments)	Campus Housing
	Student-athlete academic center	Academic Support Center
Personal Influences (\bar{x} = 4.60)	Quality of meal plan – selection, variety, nutritious, tasteful	Meal Plan
	University (not Athletic Department) recruiting material – Web page,	University Recruiting Material
	Football / athletic department social media marketing	Football Social Media Marketing
Campus (\bar{x} = 4.43)	Football / athletic department recruiting material – Web page, printed	Football Recruiting Material
	Influence of your parents	Influence Of Parents
	Friends, other family members, or relatives	Friends And Relatives
School social life	High school coach	High School Coach
	High school teammates	High School Teammates
	Attractiveness of campus – buildings, walkways, landscaping	Attractiveness Of Campus
School social life	Location of university – town, city, state, or region	Location Of University
	Size of university	Size Of University
	School social life	School Social Life