THE IMPACT OF ATHLETIC FACILITIES ON THE RECRUITMENT OF POTENTIAL STUDENT-ATHLETES

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PURPOSE: This study examined the impact that athletic facilities and other college choice factors have on the recruitment of student-athletes to play Division I college hockey compared to the influence of other college choice factors. Although athletic facilities and their seeming importance in the recruitment of top level student-athletes are popular in Intercollegiate Athletics, the athletic facilities may not play a significant role in the recruitment of student-athletes to play Division I college hockey.

METHODS: In order to explore this phenomenon, nineteen Division I hockey players were recruited to complete a college choice factor survey. The participants completed a two page survey titled “College Choice Factors”. The main body of this instrument asked the student-athletes to rate the degree of influence each of the 24 college choice factors listed had in their decision to select the institution they would attend. Additionally, there were two demographic questions, and one open-ended question to answer.

RESULTS: The results of this survey show that the top three reasons student-athletes chose to attend their respective institution were the perceived opportunity to play immediately, receiving athletic-related financial aid, and the perceived future professional playing opportunities. Athletic facilities, as the reason to attend their college was well down the list, tied with official on-campus visit for tenth out of twenty-four.

CONCLUSION: The athletic facilities used by Men’s Ice Hockey teams do not play a significant role in the recruitment of student-athletes to attend the university.

Student-Athlete Recruiting in College Athletics

Although recruiting student-athletes is an important component of college athletics, the process itself is intended to shape the student-athletes selection of a college. Despite the increasing importance of recruiting across all divisions of the NCAA, the process has received very little scholarly attention (Klenosky, Templin& Troutman, 2001).

“Recruiting is the lifeline to an athletic program. Without gifted athletes, even the most talented strategist or motivator will be rendered ineffective as a coach” (Dailing 2002, p. 24). At Adrian College (MI), the university has undertaken a strategy to help recruit students through their athletics teams. Their plan is for the coaches of the sixteen varsity sports to bring in 200 athletes each year. According to the President of Adrian College, Jeffrey Dock-
ing, “we say to these coaches, you have one job: Recruit. We’ve had to let go of coaches who haven’t made their numbers” (Sander, 2008, p. 3) A greater understanding of the college choice factors of a student-athlete will help facilitate the process for attracting these student-athletes, as well as retaining them. Recruiting is one of the greatest challenges a college coach has, and the ability to understand what the student-athlete is looking for in their choice of a school will go a long way to the level of success that a coach and his program have in attracting these recruits. Therefore, it can be said that the biggest challenge a coach faces is not on the field of play, rather it is on the recruiting trail.

**College Choice Factors and Recruiting**

There has not been a large number of studies done that would determine the absolute reason why student-athletes choose to attend one school over another. There has been some, and the responses vary. For example, in 1991, Adler & Adler conducted a study using a sample of 39 Division I male basketball players. The top responses as to why they chose this particular institution were the coach and the program, the reputation of the coach, the style of play by the team, perceived amount of playing time, television exposure, perceived opportunity to play professional sport, social life, and academic factors. In another, Reynaud (1998) conducted a study of 457 female volleyball players. The five most influential factors were the offering of a scholarship, the academic reputation of the school, the head coach, the availability of their preferred academic major, and the players presently on the team. Gabert, Hale, & Montalvo (1999) conducted a study of 246 first time, first-year student-athletes. Their study used a combination of NCAA Division I, or II, or NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) level student-athletes. Their top five most influential choice factors included head coach, location of school, opportunity to play, degree programs, and academic support services. In the study by Letawsky (2001), the top five most influential college choice factors were degree program options, head coach, academic support services, type of community where institution is located, and school’s sports traditions. There have been numerous studies of college choice factors for the general population of students, and, to a much lesser degree, studies related to the college choice factors for student-athletes. What is clear, is that while many of the college choice factors are the same for both populations, it is imperative for those involved in the recruiting effort to have an understanding of what the most influential factors are for the student-athletes they are recruiting. Coaches and their staff that have answers to what is most influential to their potential student-athlete recruits will definitely have a recruiting advantage on their competition. That is why this study involving men’s ice hockey can be useful to the coaches. In fact, having a study of all athletic teams can be very useful to the respective coaches as they bring student-athletes into their programs.
Participants

Nineteen Division I student-athletes participating in men's ice hockey were the accessible population for the researcher and this study. The nineteen represented all four classes (freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior), with varying degrees of athletic scholarship or financial aid.

Factors Influencing College Choice for the Total Sample

Based on the mean scores calculated for the twenty-four college choice factors, the five most influential factors given for choosing a college were: perceived opportunity to play immediately \((M = 4.32)\), athletic-related financial aid \((M = 4.05)\), perceived future professional sporting opportunities \((M = 4.05)\), school's sports traditions \((M = 3.58)\), and the location \((M = 3.37)\). Of the top five factors, two were related to the campus environment and three were related directly to athletic environment. The five least influential factors were prospect of television exposure \((M = 2.11)\), residential facilities \((M = 2.11)\), school's won/loss record from previous year \((M = 1.79)\), school colors (orange/brown) \((M = 1.42)\), and lastly, college choice of your high school friends \((M = 1.16)\).

Interestingly, with regards to the athletic facilities, hockey training facilities (weight/locker room) \((M = 3.32)\) finished in a tie for the sixth most influential college choice factor, and the home arena/rink \((M = 3.05)\) finished as the twelfth most influential factor.

College Choice Factors by Scholarship Status

Beginning with full athletic scholarship the most influential variable was athletic-related financial aid \((M = 4.8)\). Second most influential was perceived opportunity to play immediately \((M = 4.7)\), followed by perceived future professional sporting opportunities \((M = 4.3)\), location of their university \((M = 3.8)\), and assistant or position coach \((M = 3.8)\). Interestingly, the top three in the full athletic scholarship status are the same three as were the top three in the total sample, albeit in a different order. The student-athletes on full scholarship had, as their most influential factor, athletic-related financial aid ahead of being able to play immediately. The bottom three factors for these full scholarship student-athletes were other (non-athletics) financial aid (loans, etc.) at \((M = 1.6)\), school colors at \((M = 1.5)\), and at the bottom was college choice of your high school friends \((M = 1.2)\). As for the athletic facilities, locker room/weight room ranked tied for sixth most influential factor \((M = 3.6)\), and the facility/Ice Arena finished twelfth out of twenty-four \((M = 3.1)\).

Athletic-related financial aid \((M = 4)\) was also the number one (tied) factor for those receiving partial athletic scholarships. School's sports traditions was rated high as well \((M = 4)\), followed by perceived opportunity to play immediately \((M = 3.67)\), perceived future professional sporting opportunities \((M = 3.67)\), and travel opportunities \((M = 3.67)\). The lowest rated factors for the partial scholarship student-athletes were school colors and school's won loss record from previous year, both at \((M = 1.5)\), and at the bottom was college colors.
choice of your high school friends ($M = 1.17$). The athletic facilities locker room/weight room ($M = 3.17$) rated tied for tenth, while the facility/Ice Arena ($M = 3.50$) rated tied sixth.

Non-athletic scholarship recipients had different college choice factors. Perceived opportunity to play ($M = 4.5$) was the top factor, followed by campus social life ($M = 4$). There were several factors that followed, all having a mean of 3.5. These consisted of degree program options, perceived future professional sporting opportunities, school’s sports traditions, opinion of high school/other teammates, and hockey training facilities (weight/locker room). The bottom three in this category were exactly the same as the partial scholarship student-athletes: school colors, school’s won/loss record from the previous year, and college choice of your high school friends. The weight room/locker room ($M = 3.5$) rated third for this subgroup, while the facility/Ice Arena ($M = 2.5$) rated tied for ninth most influential factor.

For the non-scholarship status, four of the college choice factors tied for first at $M = 5$. They are other (non-athletics) financial aid (loans, etc.), location, perceived future professional sporting opportunities, and family (dad, mom brother/sister). Some other college choice factors were rated high with those not receiving hockey-related financial aid, such as financial aid, location, and family. Three of their top four choices were not hockey related, but rather campus related. The next two in order were perceived opportunity to play immediately and size (enrollment) of the school, both at $M = 4$. The athletic facilities for this non-scholarship subgroup rated below the top ten in both weight room/locker room, and in facility/Ice Arena.

The results summarized showed that for the total sample, perceived opportunity to play immediately, athletic–related financial aid, perceived future professional sporting opportunities, school’s sports traditions, and location of the university were the most influential college choice factors. Looking at the four scholarship status sub-groups, the two most influential factors were the perceived opportunity to play immediately, followed closely by perceived future professional sporting opportunities. All four of the subgroups had these two factors listed in the top three. When analyzed further, full and partial athletic scholarship factors both have athletic-related financial aid as the number one factor when choosing their college of choice. Non-athletic scholarship and non-scholarship status do not have this ranked anywhere in their top fifteen. Clearly, receiving scholarship money is an overwhelming factor to student-athletes when they are being recruited. The only two other college choice factors that were listed in the top five most influential were location of school, and school’s sports traditions.

There was a third open-ended question asked. This question asked “How do your school’s hockey-related facilities compare with the other universities you considered attending”? This question allowed the team members to give thought to the athletic facilities they had at their disposal. Overall, participants thought their facilities were average compared to other facilities.
that they considered. A couple of respondents thought their facility was “old and outdated”. Many of them thought their facility was “comparable” to the other ice arenas.

The overriding question of this paper is the impact of athletic facilities on the recruitment of potential student-athletes. Based on the review of literature of the influence of athletic facilities as a college choice factor, research would suggest that athletics facilities do not play a tremendously important role in the recruitment of potential student-athletes. Recruits, considering that the training facilities (weight/locker room) ranked tied for sixth out of the twenty-four college choice factors, and the facility/Ice Arena facility ranked tied for twelfth, one would ascertain that the facilities do not have a very big impact on the recruitment of potential student-athletes. Additionally, when the team members were asked their thoughts of the athletic facilities at their disposal, they thought their facilities were average to the other that they visited.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study may be utilized in the future by those charged with the responsibility of recruiting student-athletes. By researching the college choice factors utilized in this study, recruiters will have a better understanding of which college choice factors have the most influence on a potential student-athlete. Each individual is different to be sure, but by reviewing previous research on this topic, recruiters can find out what has historically been influential to the student-athletes, and potentially design their recruiting policies and procedures to what student-athletes have listed as being most influential.

It is interesting to note that athletic facilities do not, with regards to the subjects in this study, as well as in the literature review of previous studies, impact bringing in student-athletes to play Division I hockey. In fact, in the previous research, facilities were well down the list of most influential college choice factors just as they were in this study. Based on the results of this study then, what can hockey coaches do in regards to recruiting student-athletes? If perceived opportunity to play immediately, athletic-related financial aid, and perceived professional opportunities are the three most influential factors for college choice as this study has shown, then the coaches have recruited these individuals for the wrong reasons. First and foremost, the head coach has to get himself in the position as being the figurehead of the program. If the head coach is not the most influential factor, then they definitely have to be in the top three. Student-athletes must want to play hockey because of the coach, the school, and the opportunity to earn a college degree. Presenting the institution as an integrated entity rather than focusing solely on the athletic side should help in the recruitment of these individuals. The school’s sports traditions, location and size of the school, and campus social life were all listed ahead of the athletic facilities, the coaching staff, and academics as reasons these student-athletes attended their institution. These should be emphasized during the recruiting process. There is no question that student-athletes want to play immediate-
ly upon arrival to campus. But all of them are not ready.

References


