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College Choice Factors Influencing Community College Softball Players

Mark Vermillion, PhD
Wichita State University

Abstract

A large amount of research and scholarship has focused on the college and university choice factors of potential student-athletes. The aforementioned research, however, is disproportionately conducted using male or large revenue-generating sport participants. Kankey and Quarterman (2007) addressed these biases by developing a questionnaire and conducting research centered on Division I softball players in Ohio regarding the factors that influenced their college or university choice. Additionally, Kankey and Quarterman advocated more research utilizing different athlete populations to further analyze college and university choice factors among student athletes. As a result, the purpose of this research is to apply Kankey and Quarterman's (2007) questionnaire to community college softball players in an attempt to determine: What factors are important to community college softball players when deciding to attend their present school? Statistical analyses indicate the most important choice factor to be head coach. Other important factors include personal relationships, financially-based reasons, and academics. The least important factors included media related issues, school infrastructure, and past coaches. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) student choice model is combined with Symbolic Interactionism to explain results, and provides recommendations for college sport practitioners.



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Introduction

According to Kankey and Quarterman (2007), a vast majority of colleges and universities within the United States “sponsor intercollegiate athletics for their students” (p. 35). Indeed, university athletic programs have become increasingly popular and important to an overall college experience for students. Additionally, student athletes, within a variety of sports, also impact universities because it is perceived that sport programs increase student enrollment and revenue-generating opportunities (Coakley, 2007). Another potential expense to colleges or universities is the process of recruiting student-athletes. Understanding which athletes to recruit and how to efficiently recruit these individuals can decrease the overall time and cost of recruiting activities. If universities are able to streamline the recruiting process by addressing the most pertinent issues to potential recruits, then athletic departments in general and softball programs in particular, are able to lower the costs of recruiting, thereby positively impacting the larger university fiscal environment. Additionally, conducting research regarding college or university choice factors, especially when organized within a social framework, helps both practitioners and academics in understanding the identities of student-athletes by illustrating what is important to them during the recruiting process; that is, it is posited that by understanding what choice factors are important to student-athletes provides a window into how they see themselves, their athletic career, their education, and their post-athletic career lives.

This research focuses exclusively on softball players and attempts to extend Kankey and Quarterman’s (2007) findings regarding factors influencing the university choice of NCAA Division I softball players by utilizing their questionnaire in reference to community college softball players, many of whom will subsequently transfer to four-year institutions and continue playing softball. As a result, the purpose of this project is to readily identify what college or university factors influence community college softball players when deciding to attend their present school. To accurately ground this project within the previous literature in this area, a brief, non-exhaustive background includes a discussion of factors influencing the college or university choice of the general student body, student-athletes, and female or sport-specific student-athletes. Additionally, combining theories from Kankey and Quarterman’s (2007) original work, Hossler and Gallaher’s (1987) model, and Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) will help to explain or describe not only the data collected, but also the presented results and future recommendations.

Background

A voluminous amount of research has been conducted regarding university choice factors for the general student body (see Astin, 1965, Gorman, 1976, Kealey & Rockel, 1987, Lory & Garman, 1995, and Hu & Hossler, 2000). Important university choice factors to the general student body include proximity to family, friends, financial aid, academic reputation, available programs, and the location of the institution. Additionally, Kankey and Quarterman (2007) reported “[a]lthough not as plentiful as the studies for the general



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college/university studies, there has been a growing body of literature on the college choice decisions of student-athletes in general” (p. 36). This body of literature includes research regarding male athletes (Fielitz, 2001), women’s intercollegiate athletics (Nicodemus, 1990), male basketball players (Ulferts, 1992), freshmen football players (Fortier, 1986), Division III male athletes and non-athletes (Giese, 1986), and football players (Kraft & Dickerson, 1996).

Kankey and Quarterman (2007) identified four factors common in these studies. These commonalities include: 1) opportunity to play, 2) academic factors, 3) amount of scholarship, and 4) head coach. Moreover, Kankey and Quarterman (2007) state that there is very little research done regarding “factors that influence student athletes’ choice by gender and by specific sport teams” (p. 37). They note research was conducted with volleyball players (Widdison, 1982 and Reynaud, 1998) and women basketball players (Heilman, 1988 and Speer, 1992). The lack of research in this area indicates a gap in the knowledge base, thereby justifying their project. Finally, Kankey and Quarterman (2007) call for more research into women’s sports. Additionally, more research needs to be done centering on the marginalized or less visible sports, such as softball, lacrosse, field hockey, etc.

Regarding the call for future research, this research attempts to further expand the research centering on choice factors for female athletes. Additionally, very little research has been conducted regarding community college student-athletes. In fact, a literature search on SPORTDiscus with full text (during the summer of 2008) revealed only one article regarding community college student-athletes. The article centered on steroid use among California community college student-athletes (Kersey, 1996), not choice factors or those focused on female athletics. Consequently, this research focuses on (female) community college softball players in order to fill in this gap in the knowledge base regarding college or university choice factors and women’s sport.

Conceptual Framework

The original conceptual framework utilized by Kankey and Quarterman (2007) to organize and represent their data and findings was Hossler and Gallaher’s (1987) model. It is a three-stage model that identifies and describes the college selection process of individuals. The three stages are as follows:

- Predisposition stage: Individuals decide if they want to continue into higher education by pursuing colleges or universities.
- Search stage: Individuals evaluate many options and interact heavily with potential colleges or universities
- Choice stage: Individuals in this stage submit applications to a small pool of colleges or universities.

Their research focused primarily on the last stage within Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model. Specifically, the “choice stage” is when the student (athlete) becomes serious about a select few colleges or universities. Moreover, during this stage the student (athlete) weighs potential costs and benefits in order to make a sound decision. For student-athletes, this stage could encompass not only being recruited, but also critically examining



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the factors that are the most pertinent to their specific situation and taking official visits. Focusing on the “choice stage” is also salient for this project, which addresses community college athletes. Understanding why some student-athletes choose to attend community college athletic programs is important for understanding student-athletes’ educational, athletic, and social motivations to attend institutions of higher education. Specific to this research, a research question resulting from Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) “choice stage” would be: what college or university factors influence community college softball players when deciding to attend specific institutions?

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is a sociological theory that is easily applied to many areas within the institution of sport. Cunningham (2007) notes “the primary goal [of SI] is to understand how people give meaning to their lives” (p. 45). Indeed, Coakley (2007) states that SI provides a way of understanding and explaining the “reality that exists in the minds of athletes, coaches, spectators, and others involved in sports” (p. 48). Within sports, SI can be used or has been applied in order to explain the underrepresentation of women in sport organization leadership positions (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007); organizational changes in youth sports in order to reflect the participants’ needs (Coakley, 2007); the meanings that gay or lesbian athletes give to their athletic roles (Anderson, 2005); sport rituals (Eitzen & Sage, 2009); understanding students’ perceptions of Native American sport imagery (Vermillion, Friedrich, & Holtz, Forthcoming); and characteristics of sport subcultures and the socialization process of rock climbers and rugby players (Donnelly & Young, 1999).

While many authors note the importance and usefulness of SI for understanding identity and meanings people attach to symbolism or sport experiences, Hughes and Kroehler (2005), following Blumer (1969) and Fine (1993), are able to parsimoniously represent SI’s assumptions into three underlying assumptions. They are as follows: 1) we respond to things in our environment based upon the meanings we have of them; 2) meanings are not inherent, but result from social interaction; and 3) meanings are always changing or evolving (See Hughes & Kroehler, 2005, p. 22 for more discussion). Eitzen and Sage (2009) note the assumptions of SI help to form our “constructed reality” or how we see, interpret, and understand the social world around us.

SI’s usefulness to this research is evident, when combined with Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) choice model. Explaining or describing choice factors that are important to community college softball players from SI’s perspective is important for understanding why the most salient choice factors identified by the softball players were, indeed, chosen. Ritzer (2000) notes that Stryker (1980) attempts to extend SI’s applicability by integrating it with role theory. What becomes extremely important, here, is the idea that student-athletes are actively involved in roles (their role as a student, athletic participant, worker, daughter, etc.). Understanding that these roles, influenced by larger cultural or societal forces, impact the individual is important for interpreting these student athletes’ decisions to attend the community colleges they did. Being able to interpret the underlying symbolic meaning of, for example, choosing availability of academic major or program over playing time or the team’s social climate would be very informative to educators, athletic program administrators, and coaches.



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Indeed, Hughes and Kroehler (2005) note SI's ability to see people as decision-makers and how these decisions affect the meaning of their social world (p. 23).

Significance

This research project is significant in a number of ways, as previously mentioned. First, Kankey and Quarterman (2007) observed that very little scholarship is devoted to female, sport specific teams when analyzing university choice factors of student athletes. As a result, this research addresses this gap in the literature base. Additionally, the research would provide a useful entry into the research knowledge base regarding community college student-athletes and the choice factors influencing their decisions to transfer to four-year institutions.

Secondly, the research would also be useful to university softball programs, additional university sport programs, and the larger university environment. Specifically, the research will help streamline the recruiting process for many softball programs by identifying the most important choice factors for student-athletes transferring schools. Previous research has focused almost exclusively on incoming freshmen student-athletes. Community college student-athletes might be more focused on certain choice factors, which have not been addressed in previous research, thereby affecting athletic recruiting tactics. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2006) note in a research report developed for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) that only 14% of female student-athletes that transferred colleges did so for "athletic reasons" (p. 33). This figure highlights the need for research that focuses on more than athletic based choice factors (e.g., coaching staff, facilities, and chance to continue playing softball). Knowing the choice factors could lead to more efficient and productive recruiting by explicitly focusing on salient college choice factors for this particular population.

Finally, this research is relevant as softball programs and athletic departments, in general, build relationships with other university program and units. If specific majors or programs are identified as being important to potential recruits, then sport programs can work with these identified majors or programs and facilitate interaction between potential recruits and these programs. This process helps integrate all aspects of a community college, including academic subunits and athletic departments, into a unified institution of higher education.

Research Questions

Babbie (2002) notes "[r]eliability is a concern every time a single observer is the source of data, because we have no certain guard against the impact of that observer's subjectivity" (p. 137). Evaluating the reliability of not only previous conclusions, but also validating measurement tools (i.e., surveys) is crucial to the scientific objectivity of social scientific research. Replication of social research utilizing different populations in different times and spaces is a useful way of contributing to a scholarship base. Additionally, evaluating the validity of measurement instruments is important for increasing understanding within a discipline (Babbie, 2002). A discussion of reliability is important to the significance of this research because re-examining research tools



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(i.e., surveys) from previous research is crucial for 1) understanding a tool's usefulness, and 2) providing more research by addressing a different population with reliable and valid research measures.

The research questions guiding this research were influenced by Kankey and Quarterman's (2007) call for future research regarding college or university choice factors for female athletes. Based upon their previous research questions and theoretical orientation, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, and utilized in conjunction with SI's theoretical influence, the following research question is posed: Which college and university choice factors are the most influential for having community college softball players attend their present school? That is, what factors are the most important to community college softball players when deciding to attend their present school?

Methodology

Participants

Respondents' information were collected from community college softball programs within Region six (VI) of the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA), and served as a convenience, non-probability sample. It is believed, however, that such a sample will yield important results for not only state-based university athletic programs, but also university and other community college athletic programs across the region. Participants included scholarship and non-scholarship players and included both players on the active roster and those team members that were injured and not playing.

Regarding the sample, the majority were considered freshman (60% vs. 40%), with the modal age (46.4% of the sample) being 19 years old, and from the US (89.3%), which reflects the population of community college (i.e., two year schools) athletes. Additionally, the racial diversity of the sample was reflected in the following: white (38.5%), black (10.3%), Asian (13.1%), Hispanic (17.2%), and other (18.9%). A majority (44.7%) of respondents self reported approximate parental income to be between \$40,000 and \$54,999, with 14.1% reporting family income to be less than \$25,000, and 23.7% reporting a parental income over \$75,000. Regarding their financial and grant in aid status, 84.9% of respondents report being recruited and offered a scholarship, 52.6% receiving a full athletic grant in aid (46.4% with a partial athletic grant in aid), and almost one third of the sample (32.3%) reporting they received other, non-athletic financial aid. Finally, the diversity of the sample is once again reflected in the distance players are from their home town. Twenty-two percent report being less than 500 miles away from home, but 53.3% of the sample attend school over 1,000 miles away from home.

Measure

This research employed Kankey and Quarterman's (2007) survey with only slight, non-substantive changes being made on the instrument simply to make the survey population specific. The survey included a section regarding the 37 choice factors influencing the players to attend a (community) college, and a demographics



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section which included questions regarding race and/or ethnicity, parental income, size of high school graduating class, and the distance, in their best estimation, their hometown is from the community college. Respondents measured the importance of choice factors by responding to items on a five-point scale, which ranged from 5 (extremely important) to 1 (unimportant). Kankey and Quarterman (2007) reported the Cronbach's alpha for their original research to be .79, which is above the suitable level in the social sciences. The Cronbach's alpha for this project was .92, and the surveys collected information at one point in time. The data were collected over a three-month period (from March to May) all across Region VI of the NJCAA and was supported by a grant awarded to the researcher.

Procedure

Data were collected from community college softball players after contacting head coaches. Specifically, coaches were contacted (via email and subsequent follow-up calls) and asked, at their convenience, for their team's participation. Coaches were informed: 1) of the nature and scope of the project, 2) the project was IRB (Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects) approved, and 3) the research was part of a large university grant extended to the researcher to better inform coaches, conference administrators, and academic research. Data were collected in one of three ways: 1) players were surveyed after individual games or series; 2) players were surveyed while in a team meeting or other official team activity; or 3) players were surveyed between games at one of the several large tournaments attended by the researcher. In all cases, surveys and written consent forms were distributed and collected. Participants were informed that participation is voluntary and the nature of the project was explained. In all cases, players filled out the surveys while coaches were not present in order to avoid biasing survey responses. Both Region VI directors and participating coaches were sent final project results. After coding the surveys and entering the data into SPSS for data analysis, the final number of usable surveys was 291 ($n = 291$).

Results

A univariate analysis helps in describing, initially, what college choice factors are important to community college softball players. To better assess the statistical significance of the frequency distribution, chi-square analyses were conducted along possible responses for each factor. Since this research is exploratory in nature (i.e., lack of research conducted using community college student-athletes) the frequencies were tested against an equal distribution for each response on each question or factor, which does not privilege one factor over another, since the prevalence of one factor over another factor has not been addressed in the community college athlete literature. This equal response distribution better reflects the research question regarding what choice factors influence these community college softball players to attend their present school (i.e., community college). The chi-square test, known as a goodness-of-fit model, tests the applicability of the null hypothesis (Diekhoff, 1992). The null hypothesis in this research stated: there are no differences in the importance of college choice factors for community college softball players. That is, each factor (and its accompanying responses) was equally important and influential upon the softball player. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis would state there are differences in the importance of college choice factors influencing community college softball players.



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Table 1 shows each factor, chi-square values, degrees of freedom, and significance levels.

As indicated, chi-square analyses revealed all college choice factors, adapted from Kankey and Quarterman (2007), were significant at the $p < .001$ level. As a result, we reject the null hypothesis, which states there are no differences in the importance of specific factors influencing community college softball players to attend their present community college. Since the null hypothesis has been rejected, the research reveals that some factors were rated as more influential by softball players when choosing their school. Additionally, the research identified the least influential factors influencing softball players. While the survey factors are structured with ordinal responses, Diekhoff (1992) notes that some ordinal data can be treated as interval data. As a result, Table 2 presents the median values (for ordinal data) and the percentages of respondents indicating their responses to “extremely important” or “very important” for each factor as a way of better describing this exploratory data and research.

The five most important factors to community college softball players in this sample were head coach, availability of academic program or major, the social atmosphere of the team, career opportunities after graduation, and the cost of the college, respectively. The five least important choice factors for community college softball players were media coverage, the current program being recommended by their high school coach, the size of the college, the softball team’s website, and the ethnic or gender ratio of the school.

Regarding Table 2 medians (the best measure for central tendency for ordinal variables), standard deviations, and percentages (along factor responses) rating “extremely important” or “very important” were presented in order to provide academics, practitioners, and students with important choice factors for community college softball players. In particular, one item in the survey had a median of 5.0, while 28 items or slightly over 67% had a median of 4.0. Nine items or 24% of the choice factors in the survey had a median of 3.0; while two items or slightly over 5% had a median of 2.0 (no factors had a median of 1.0). The most highly rated choice factors, by over 80% of respondents, were head coach (Mdn=5.0, SD= 0.79), availability of academic program or major (Mdn= 4.0, SD= 0.89), team’s social atmosphere (Mdn=4.0, SD= 0.88), and career opportunities after graduation (Mdn= 4.0, SD= 0.92). Additional factors with medians of 4.0 and rated as “extremely important” or “very important” by more than 70% of respondents include: availability of resources (Mdn=4.0, SD= 0.95), amount of playing time (Mdn=4.0, SD= 0.97), cost of the college (Mdn=4.0, SD= 1.11), overall reputation of the college (Mdn=4.0, SD=0.95), amount of athletic grants in aid (Mdn=4.0, SD= 0.97), and the school’s campus (Mdn=4.0, SD=0.88).

There were only five factors where 25% or less of the survey respondents rated these factors as “extremely important” or “very important.” These factors included media coverage (Mdn=3.0, SD=1.15), the size of the college (Mdn=3.0, SD= 0.91), the softball team’s website (Mdn= 3.0, SD= 1.05), the current program being recommended by their high school coach (Mdn=2.0, SD= 1.36), and the ethnic or gender ratio of the school (Mdn=2.0, SD= 1.32).

The chi-square analysis revealed differences between distributions of item frequencies along possible responses. According to Table 2, however, there was one item which had a median of 5.0 (the highest), namely that of



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head coach. Numerous other items had medians of both 4.0 and 3.0 with only two items, the importance of the high school head coach and the gender/ethnic ratio of the school, having a median of 2.0. The large “bunching” effect of many items having high medians needs to be further explicated in order to better meaningfully examine which factor or factors exert the greatest influence upon the individual choosing to play at their respective community colleges.

Additional chi-square tests were performed in order to examine distributional differences and identify the most salient factors influencing community college softball players. Since the importance of the head coach resulted in the highest median value, the distribution across possible response categories for this particular item served as the expected values for comparison in order to highlight if other differences existed. Specifically, the head coach item had the following item distribution: unimportant (2); slightly important (6); moderately important (26); very important (93); and extremely important (164). Additionally, the null hypothesis is stated as follows: there is no difference between the head coach item distribution and the remaining factors’ item distributions. The remaining 36 factors were then compared to the head coach item distribution, instead of the goodness-of-fit model, in the previous analysis. Chi-square analyses revealed the remaining 36 factors significantly differed from the head coach item, thereby illustrating that there is a difference between the importance of the head coach and the remaining college choice factors (see Table 3). The significance of the remaining items in comparison to the head coach distribution was statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level and resulted in a rejection of the null hypothesis; that is, there are statistically significant differences between the head coach item distribution and all other items.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to identify the college choice factors that were most important to community college softball players. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the importance of the item labeled as “head coach.” Research has examined or identified the importance of the head coach on athletes’ lives in a variety of ways (see Sabcock, 2002 or Seifried, 2006). Regarding the statistical analyses, the head coach item had the fewest number of respondents selecting the middle category of “moderately important.” The inclusion of this particular response category appears to have greatly influenced the other categories, which indicated large response totals in this category. The head coach’s importance obviously resonated with survey respondents and stood out from other survey responses. Since the choice stage (from Hossler and Gallagher’s [1987] model) is a combination of many factors and influences, what becomes evident is that there were other factors, in addition to the head coach, that appear to play a role in this sample of student-athletes choosing to attend their current community college to play softball.

Additional results indicate that personal relationships (i.e., the head coach), financially based reasons (e.g., grants in aid), and academics (i.e., availability of academic program or major or resources available to student athletes) are important factors to community college softball players. These factors were similar to Kankey and Quarterman’s original results regarding Division I softball players. Media related issues, such as media



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coverage and team website, school infrastructure, such as the size of school and past coaches, have less importance to community college softball players when deciding to attend their current institution.

Utilizing Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model in conjunction with Symbolic Interactionism can be a productive and creative way to interpret the aforementioned results for practitioners, academics, and students. Specifically, using these theoretical frameworks aid in our understanding of the analyses previously presented.

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is a three stage model describing the phases students go through when selecting a college or university. To understand the "choice stage" one must understand the individuals and how being a community college softball player (in Region VI) contributes to the "choice stage." A Symbolic Interactionist (SI) approach within sport would emphasize the importance of how individuals, through sport, create meanings for their lives (Cunningham, 2007). Since many of the respondents are on athletic grants in aid (full or partial), it is evident that these softball players are dedicated to their sport and are productive players. As a result, one may posit that the many hours involved in becoming a collegiate softball player is related to how important softball is to the individual players.

Eitzen and Sage (2009) note SI is important for helping understand sport subcultures. Softball players, like many other athletes, incorporate their sport, which includes all (sub) cultural components such as normative behaviors, values, and communication techniques, into their identity; it is part of who they are as individuals. What becomes increasingly clear, however, is that for many of these student athletes softball is not the only concern for them. Building relationships with their coach and teammates is also important. Additionally, the student athletes in this sample indicate academics and availability of student resources as important determinants regarding where they would play. This illustrates that being an athlete is a role that is combined in their "role set" with other daily roles, such as being a student, which influences them as decision makers in their social world (Hughes & Kroehler, 2005). Indeed, the chi-square results illustrate not all factors are equally important when deciding to attend their present school. The importance of certain factors over other factors illustrates how multifaceted softball players' identities were and the degree to which they have a highly varied role set. Moreover, the importance of a variety of factors can be illustrated in the finding that many factors had high median values with only two items having low median scores. Even those low median scored items had between 20% and 25% of respondents rating them as very or extremely important.

Eitzen and Sage (2009) note from an SI perspective every person's "constructed reality" is the combination of daily interactions and interpretations of ever-evolving symbolism – both in sport and in general society. The reality of softball is this: there are few "professional" opportunities, which are reserved for elite, select players, and total incorporation of one athletic role in the identity formation process is rather impractical at this level. As a result, other factors, such as academics and personal relationships, become important determinants for community college softball players. The aforementioned determinants can coexist, quite naturally, with the athletic role and help to provide the individual with a well-rounded identity. The relationships and the academic preparation are skills and rewards that will extend, for many, far past the days of playing collegiate or professional softball.



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Finally, the importance of the head coach, which had the highest median and percentage rating among all factors, cannot be understated because of their position as an authority figure. Previous research has shown that the coach has a dramatic influence upon athletes, regardless of the sport. For example, the Josephson Institute for ethics completed a report in 2006 illustrating the importance of the coach in young athletes' lives ("Are coaches teaching our young athletes the right way to play?" 2006). Indeed, Sabcock (2002) noted coaches' influence upon athletes can have positive or negative effects and Seifried (2006) asserted that the coach, as a position, can impact athletes' socialization by metering out discipline in a sport-related setting. The position of head coach, as a result, exerts an enormous influence upon athletes and has the potential for positively influencing athletes' perceptions of both softball and education. Realizing that coaches have the opportunity to communicate the benefits of not only their athletic team, but also the community college's resources and benefits addresses the many roles of these student-athletes.

Understanding the college choice factors of these community college softball players is important for making sport program decisions. As a result of the research, three recommendations are provided for community college sport practitioners. First, the multifaceted identities of community college softball players in this sample must be recognized by athletic and educational personnel. While sport is extremely important to them, it is not their singular focus and is part-in-parcel to "other" aspects of how they view themselves. Coaches should understand that factors other than softball are important to potential players. While recruiting potential players, coaches should find out as much as they can about the prospect outside of softball, such as career aspirations or goals. Since the head coach is such an important determinant for attending these community colleges, head coaches should recognize that they have the opportunity to positively impact potential recruits by sharing personal experiences within the community college setting.

Secondly, when recruiting, community college athletic personnel should be aware that they should emphasize numerous factors such as the team chemistry, the school's academic and overall reputation, the various support networks (physical and social) provided to the athletes, and how their school can provide not only a great experience while the student-athlete is there, but also that the education and social experiences they have while at that school are influential for their post-athletic careers. If coaches identify how softball fits into the "constructed reality" of the player, then they can promote how their softball program and college as whole can positively impact the player.

The relative uniqueness of community college institutions lies in the fact that while granting degrees, many recipients of these degrees (i.e., associate's degrees) transfer to other four-year institutions. Recruitment of potential student-athletes should highlight the "student" aspect and illustrate how the individual is nurtured within the community college system, both academically and athletically, and this nourishment provides the foundation for future individual success in many arenas. Since the head coach has such influence upon these potential student-athletes, as previously mentioned, s/he has the opportunity to utilize their position to better educational attainment opportunities for their athletes.



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Third, the best way to illustrate a multifaceted recruitment process emphasizing academics, athletics, and social experiences is to integrate other academic and social groups into campus visits. Recruiting and on-campus visits should attempt to incorporate other academic departments and academic support personnel by having recruits meet with a variety of advisors, counselors, teachers, and even department heads. While this recommendation is time and labor intensive, it could illustrate to both the recruit and the recruit's family that the community college athletic experience attempts to develop well-rounded student-athletes and does not accurately fit the stereotype that community college student-athletes either could not perform athletically or that they were incapable of acceptable academic performance at larger schools. Results from this research also indicate a singular focus on athletic facilities, sponsors, or the size of the campus may not be as important or beneficial when persuading recruits. Knowing which factors are important to these athletes allows coaches and athletic personnel to address the most pertinent topics while recruiting student-athletes, which means a better and more efficient use of time and financial resources during the recruiting process.

Limitations

These conclusions should be cautiously interpreted or applied to other student athletes. For example, this research gathered information for coaches and those collegiate administrators involved with student-athlete recruitment. While the aforementioned information can be useful, it must be remembered that according to SI one's personal identity and action can be influenced by group properties. That is, recruiting comes down to individual decisions made by student-athletes and their families involving group or social contexts. The recruiter should illustrate how all facets of their program and college relate to the individual. Overreliance upon the "head coach" as the sole salient factor influencing community college softball players is to misrepresent the aforementioned conclusions. While the head coach is extremely important, there were several other factors that were highly rated by a large percentage of the respondents as being very or extremely important (see Table 2). Additionally, while recruiting student-athletes is a social process involving many people, the final decision is an individualistic decision. Sole reliance upon group summaries, such as those presented in this research, could lead coaches and programs to miss out on potential recruits by emphasizing singular results without acknowledging that for many of these student-athletes their decision is based on a combination of these factors. Regarding the application of this research to other student-athletes, the relatively low ranking position of softball, especially community college softball, on the sport hierarchy is evident in our society by the overall lack of popularity and media coverage. As a result, these generalizations, while useful, may not pertain to all athletes at all levels or other sports. Conducting similar studies, with collaboration from the wealth of academic, methodological, and theoretical resources on college and university campuses, is crucial for understanding the factors most important to specific student-athlete populations.

Finally, the large number of respondents selecting "moderately important" for item answers could indicate a form of acquiescence bias. This type of bias occurs when respondents tend to agree/disagree with statements without regard for the item's content (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Another form of respondent bias involves social desirability where respondents highly rate responses regarding particular items



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because it is socially acceptable (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Student-athletes as a result, could have responded in such a way they perceived was appropriate, such as inflating the importance of some campus resources, or simply did not want to disagree with many of the statements, which may account for the large numbers of “moderately important” responses.

Future Research

More research should be conducted on women student-athletes in a variety of sports at a variety of levels of competition. Whether a school is NCAA, NAIA, or NJCAA is useful for understanding research results, generalizations, and limitations. Future research, as a result, should attempt to further identify and explicate differences between community college softball players and student-athletes at other levels. Further, differences between freshmen and sophomores, between international and domestic students, or differences based upon race and/or ethnicity should be examined in order to gain a better understanding of choice factors for these populations of student-athletes. Additionally, since many of these athletes will transfer to four-year schools, research should address which of the aforementioned college choice factors are influential in determining where these student-athletes continue playing (if they indeed continue playing softball).

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to identify the most important college choice factors regarding community college softball players. As community colleges attempt to compete with other community colleges and a wide variety of four-year colleges and universities, athletics becomes increasingly important for distinguishing a particular school or program. Conventional wisdom says to properly recruit, colleges and universities should highlight the time, effort, and money put into newer athletic facilities, websites, and other media related endeavors. While this is one aspect of the sport-entertainment industry, this model does not apply to all of the variations of collegiate athletic programs, participants, or experiences across differing levels of organized competition (i.e., NCAA, NAIA, NJCAA).

With recruiting and overall departmental budgets being a constant topic within higher education, being fiscally responsible is important to maintaining the athletic traditions and opportunities for smaller sports, especially women’s sports. This research identifies some college choice factors that can, potentially, assist in streamlining recruitment of potential student-athletes. Additionally, it is hoped that, although there were some limitations with the research, college athletic practitioners on a variety of levels within a variety of sports now have a better understanding of college choice factors for community college softball players and can utilize theoretical frameworks within a college athletics setting.



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About the Author

Mark Vermillion is an assistant professor in the Department of Sport Management at Wichita State University. He is a socio-cultural specialist with research interests in sport participation factors, crime/deviance in sport, and sport's impact upon the individual. He graduated from Oklahoma State University with his doctoral degree in sociology, which is his primary analytical framework for analyzing issues within sport, and has studied a wide variety of groups including collegiate athletes, community college athletes, disabled athletes, and college students' perceptions of sport imagery.

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Table 1		
Chi-Square: Frequency Distribution Statistics (n = 291)		
Factor	Degrees of Freedom	χ^2
head coach	4	332.04***
availability of major or academic program	4	236.17***
social atmosphere of team	4	225.31***
career opp after graduation	4	226.34***
cost of college/university	4	145.82***
availability of resources	4	163.76***
amount of playing time	4	159.50***
overall reputation of college/university	4	151.25***
amts of athletic grants in aid	4	146.61***
school's campus	4	190.87***
Housing	4	211.87***
amt of financial aid offered	4	112.28***
athletic facilities	4	161.80***
opportunity to win championship	4	120.43***
my parents	4	108.78***
academic program reputation	4	99.67***
meeting team members	4	133.11***
academic reputation of college	4	132.69***
conference affiliation of softball team	4	186.85***
assistant coaches	4	77.30***
softball team's win/loss record	4	160.53***
location of college/university	4	89.91***
opp to play immediately	4	97.27***
support services offered to student athletes	4	150.10***
friends	4	34.14***
fan support of the softball team	4	124.80***
campus visit	4	87.95***
social life of college/university	4	166.48***
softball team's tradition	4	107.99***



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softball team's schedule	4	43.66***
affiliation: i.e. religious, private, public	4	66.30***
softball team sponsorships	4	91.80***
media coverage	4	56.51***
high school coach	4	39.81***
size of college/university	4	189.33***
softball team's website	4	123.24***
ethnic or gender ratio of the school	4	74.80***
*p< .05, **p< .01, ***p<.001		

Factor	Mdn	SD	% rated extremely or very important
head coach	5	0.79	88.4
availability of major or academic program	4	0.89	83.1
social atmosphere of team	4	0.88	81.1
career opp after graduation	4	0.92	80.8
cost of college/university	4	1.11	72.9
availability of resources	4	0.95	71.9
amount of playing time	4	0.97	71.8
overall reputation of college/university	4	0.95	70.1
amt of athletics grants in aid	4	0.97	70.1
school's campus	4	0.88	70.1
housing	4	0.9	67.7
amt of financial aid offered	4	1.07	65
athletic facilities	4	0.96	64.9
opportunity to win championship	4	1.06	63.9
my parents	4	1.18	63.2
academic program reputation	4	1.05	62.2
meeting team members	4	0.96	61.2
academic reputation of college/university	4	0.96	60.9
conference affiliation of softball team	4	0.91	59.8



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assistant coaches	4	1.12	59.1
softball team's win/loss record	4	0.91	58.7
location of college/university	4	1.11	57.8
opp to play immediately	4	1.05	56.4
support services offered to student athletes	4	0.94	56.3
friends	4	1.34	52.6
fan support of the softball team	4	1.01	50.5
campus visit	3	1.05	49.1
social life of college/university	3	0.91	48.1
softball team's tradition	3	1.03	44.6
softball team's schedule	3	1.17	39.2
affiliation of the college/univ, ie religious, private, public	3	1.14	36.5
softball team sponsorships	3	1.16	30.2
media coverage	3	1.15	25.4
size of college/university	3	0.91	23.4
softball team's website	3	1.05	21.3
high school coach	2	1.36	25
ethnic or gender ratio of the school	2	1.32	20.6

Table 3		
Chi-Square: Frequency Distribution Statistics (n = 291) Utilizing Head Coach Distribution as Expected Values		
Factor	Degrees of Freedom	χ^2
availability of major or academic program	4	24.989***
social atmosphere of team	4	24.95***
career opp after graduation	4	44.65***
cost of college/university	4	160.17***
availability of resources	4	92.50***
amount of playing time	4	95.254***
overall reputation of college/university	4	124.07***
amts of athletic grants in aid	4	127.92***
school's campus	4	163.51***



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housing	4	230.47***
amt of financial aid offered	4	173.25***
athletic facilities	4	222.54***
opportunity to win championship	4	173.65***
my parents	4	240.21***
academic program reputation	4	258.05***
meeting team members	4	235.41***
academic reputation of college	4	240.17***
conference affiliation of softball team	4	324.54***
assistant coaches	4	324.08***
softball team's win/loss record	4	300.38***
location of college/university	4	274.31***
opp to play immediately	4	342.86***
support services offered to student athletes	4	328.86***
friends	4	747.55***
fan support of the softball team	4	600.98***
campus visit	4	516.35***
social life of college/university	4	500.63***
softball team's tradition	4	601.48***
softball team's schedule	4	1093.46***
affiliation: i.e. religious, private, public	4	1119.84***
softball team sponsorships	4	1400.80***
media coverage	4	2595.71***
high school coach	4	4650.23***
size of college/university	4	1401.15***
softball team's website	4	1729.11***
ethnic or gender ratio of the school	4	6317.77***
*p< .05, **p< .01, ***p<.001		

