COACHING MOTIVATIONS BEHIND OVER-SIGNING IN COLLEGE FOOTBALL

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

August 2014

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ABSTRACT

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This study sought to determine what factors influenced the decision making processes of college football coaches when over-signing a recruiting class or their returning roster. The NCAA Bylaws limit Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football programs to a total number of scholarships to 85 "counters" annually including 25 scholarships for "initial counters." Over-signing is the term used to describe the practice of college programs signing prospective collegiate athletes to a National Letter of Intent (NLI) that may exceed the maximum number of athletic scholarships permitted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), or when a team brings in a recruiting class that pushes the team’s amount of counters past 85 scholarships. This action results in that coaching staff taking a scholarship away from a returning player or later informing an incoming freshman that the school is not able to honor its commitment and provide him with a scholarship. Sport media writers have commented that there are many reasons/concerns for which a coach might over-sign a class such as the fact that recruits often sign a NLI and then do not qualify academically, indecisive recruits, general attrition, and that football has a high transfer rate amongst its athletes (Bachman, 2011; Doyel, 2010; Feldman, 2007; Gordon, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Machen, 2011; Towers, 2011; Whiteside; 2011). Any of these occurrences could leave a coach with a shortage of athletes, but by signing extra prospects a coach can avoid being left short/devoid of talent. Although these ideas have been written about they have not been examined through an empirical study. This study used 19 interviews with college football coaches and personnel staff to determine that over-signing occurs because of general attrition, fickle recruits, it is seen as an accepted practice, teams can gain a competitive edge, and that coaches feel pressured to win consistently.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people I would like to thank who have helped me in the construction and completion of this thesis. First and foremost, my advisor Dr. Amanda Koba for never letting me stress too much. In my past I have had moments were I would get very anxious and worried, but you kept me grounded. This study seemed incredibly daunting when I first started it, but you have helped me throughout this process in determining what I need to do to break up something massive into several little manageable parts.

I also need to thank Dr. Amy Morgan and Dr. Nancy Spencer for being fantastic educators in the classroom and preparing me to write this thesis. I used a lot of the advice that you provided in your research methods and qualitative research interpretations classes to construct my interview guide, recruitment letter, consent forms, coding system. I would also like to thank Dr. Sungho Cho and Dr. Ray Schneider for agreeing to serve on my thesis committee.

I have to thank my mom for having an amazing work ethic that I one day hope to model. It would be hard for me to be lazy after observing how hard she has worked throughout my life.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for continuing to encourage me to finish this thesis while at the same time helping me to enjoy my time at school so that I did not grow to hate my own research.

Lastly, I’d like to thank my participants. Thank you for your honesty, and in many cases humor, when you shared your opinions on over-signing and the recruitment process. The fact that many of you were passionate about college football recruiting and the topic that I was researching helped to make the process interesting and exciting for me.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Over-signing in college football is a controversial practice among many athletic administrators, coaching staffs, fans, and current/prospective collegiate athletes. Doyle (2010) explained that coaches choosing to engage in the practice of over-signing risk negatively impacting current/prospective collegiate athletes, thus actions should be taken to curtail such behavior.

Over-signing is the unofficial term that is commonly used by the media to describe the practice of American college athletic departments signing prospective collegiate athletes to a National Letter of Intent (NLI), which is a written commitment on the part of that institution to provide them with an athletic scholarship, that may exceed the maximum number of athletic scholarships permitted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The NCAA limits the total number of scholarships that may be awarded in all of its sponsored sports, and in football also limits the number of scholarships awarded in a given year. Most conferences have additional rules governing the NLI process (The National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2011).

NCAA Bylaw 15.5.6.1 limits FBS football programs to a total number of scholarships to 85 "counters" annually including 25 scholarships for "initial counters" (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2011). What this essentially means is that at any time a Division I-A college football team may only have a maximum of 85 scholarship players on its roster. Furthermore, during any one recruiting year, a team may only offer 25 high school seniors and/or junior college players an athletic scholarship. Counters (NCAA Bylaw 15.02.3) are individuals
who are receiving institutional financial aid that is countable against the aid limitations in a
sport; initial counters (NCAA Bylaw 15.02.3.1) are individuals who are receiving countable
financial aid in a sport for the first time. NCAA Bylaw 13.9.2.3 limits schools to signing 28 NLI
from initial signing day, which is always the first Wednesday in the month of February, through
May 31 (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2011). Over-signing occurs in other
sports but has received the most attention from media members and fans in regard to Division I
FBS football (Bateman, 2011; Doyle, 2010; Feldman, 2007; Infante, 2011; Johnson, 2011;
Staples, 2011a; Staples, 2011b; Towers, 2011; Whiteside, 2011).

The practice of over-signing can occur in two different ways. First, if a school signs a
student to a NLI that brings their total number of counters above the NCAA limit of 85, meaning
the team has more players that they are promising to provide a scholarship than the NCAA
permits. The second way would be to sign more than 25 incoming collegiate athletes to a NLI
during the period between football’s National Signing Day, which is always the first Wednesday
in February, and May 31. Even though NCAA rules permit over-signing up to 28 NLI, some
college football fans view this practice as immoral, arguing that it allows schools and coaches the
opportunity to be deceitful with recruits. The deceit occurs when coaches promise a player a
roster spot and scholarship only to withdraw it before that individual completes their time in
college or, in some cases, before they enroll and become a student (Doyel, 2010).

The issue of over-signing is important because it has the ability to negatively impact both
current and potential collegiate athletes (Felder, 2012; Whiteside, 2011) and some have also
argued that over-signing affects competitive balance (Bachman, 2011; Gordon 2011). The
negative impact can come in one of two ways. The first possible way will be exemplified in this
hypothetical scenario: assume that after the completion of the 2013 season that a university has
65 scholarship athletes on its football team that will be returning to play football in the fall of 2014. If that university were to sign 25 potential collegiate athletes to a NLI then that would bring their total to 90 players on scholarship. Because NCAA rules prohibit a school from having more than 85 players on scholarship, 5 football players – whether current, incoming, or combination of both – would need to be cut and thus that collegiate athlete would be without an athletic scholarship. This is important because if this were to happen to a current player they would be forced to either transfer or play as a walk-on, which would mean they would have to pay for their education out-of-pocket. Unfortunately, the incoming athlete sometimes finds at the end of the summer that their scholarship is being pulled which puts them in an difficult transfer position because many schools have already given out their 85 scholarships for the year (Machen, 2011).

Also, depending on what year in school the athlete is, it might have an impact on their ability to transfer and graduate from another institution within a reasonable time. If the player that loses the scholarship is an incoming freshman, this situation might leave him without a desirable offer once the university alerts him that they will not be honoring the NLI the he signed. This might lead them to walking on somewhere else, greyshirting – enrolling at the university part-time to delay the start of their eligibility clock – and waiting for a scholarship in the next recruiting class, or accepting a scholarship offer with a non-Bowl Championship Series (BCS) conference or at a Division I-AA Football Championship Series (FCS) school that may not have the media exposure, proximity to home, facilities, or academics that influenced them on their choice of the institution that they wanted to attend (Kraft & Dickerson, 1996; Letawsky et al., 2003; Ryan, Groves, & Schneider, 2007; Smith, 2006).
The second possible way would be if a school were to sign more than 25 players to NLI’s, even the 28 that they are allowed to sign, they will have to hurt those recruits that they over-sign by not providing them with a scholarship. The NCAA allows for teams to sign 28 athletes to a NLI because they are attempting to account for students that might not qualify academically (Infante, 2012). They only have 25 new NLI’s in the fall, so if they sign 30 recruits to an NLI then that means that 5 of them will have to be left in a bind as they now must find new schools to attend, assuming that they were only able to attend their current institution because of the financial assistance the scholarship provided. Assuming all 30 are academically eligible, 5 of them will likely be told in the summer that the team no longer has a scholarship to provide them. Those players will then be left scrambling to find new schools that might still have an offer available or walk-on/grey shirt at the school they initially intended to attend (Machen, 2011).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine what motivates coaches to over-sign their recruiting classes/rosters. The current system, which some college administrators despise, has resulted in players losing scholarships after already being enrolled at an institution or having their offer rescinded just prior to enrollment (Machen, 2011). Losing that scholarship can put a player in a troubling situation as the cost of college is expensive and losing the full-ride scholarship that football provided may make attending that institution no longer a viable option for some players. That means that they might have to transfer, which can be a complicated process all by itself. From the incoming student’s prospective, over-signing can hurt them by severely limiting their options or possibly eliminating the option of attending college completely.
College football coaches are not ignorant of the circumstances that a player faces due to over-signing. To some it might come across as unethical or immoral to inconvenience an 18-20 year young old adult in a way that was previously described. Since the practice of over-signing in college football is pervasive (Staples, 2011a), it is the aim of this study to determine why a coach and his staff would continue to engage in the practice. This study used an interview guide to determine what factors influence or motivate a coach to over-sign a recruiting class, how do coaches perceive the impact of over-signing will affect the players involved, and what calls for social change within college football recruiting they might like to see that would help prevent over-signing from hurting players while at the same time allowing teams to be competitive. In summary, the main research questions for this study are:

1) What motivates coaches to engage in the practice of over-signing?
2) When coaches are recruiting, to what extent do they concern themselves with how their actions might affect other players?
3) What changes need to/should be made to improve the current college football recruiting system?

Research Design

In order to answer the primary research questions of this study coaches and professional staff currently working at the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level were interviewed and asked to answer questions pertaining to over-signing. Some of the participants chose to participate through a phone interview while others decided to complete the interview guide during their spare time. A total of 17 coaches/professional staff took part in this study from 8 of the FBS conferences: the American Athletic Conference (AAC), the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference, the Big 12 Conference, Conference USA, the Mid-American
Conference, the Mountain West Conference, the PAC 12 Conference, and the Sun Belt Conference. An interview guide was created for use in this study that was structured in such a way to allow for participants to openly give opinions about the practice of over-signing. The questions that the respondents addressed required extensive answers in order to adequately respond to each question which is why a qualitative study was the chosen research method for this study. The coaches that agreed to take part in this study were coded prior to analysis so as to protect their anonymity. Originally, the plan was to contact recruiting coordinators at the BCS level, which was initially meant with a low response rate. All coaches and professional staff working in college football were then contacted to participate in this study.

To conduct this study, qualitative research was chosen because the primary researcher believes it will effectively help answer the primary research questions of this study. In order to answer the research questions “what motivates coaches to engage in the practice of over-signing?” and “when coaches are recruiting, to what extent they concern themselves with how their actions might affect other players?” qualitative research needs to be conducted. The third primary research question for this study, “what changes could/should be made to improve the current college football recruiting system”, seeks to determine from the coaches whether or not they believe that over-signing could be avoided through the implementation of new rules. Coaches might feel like they have to over-sign in order to compete, so one of the main aims of this study is to get their prospective on ideas for change within college football recruiting. The use of open-ended questions in this study will allow coaches an opportunity to offer their opinions on recruiting, while also allowing me a chance to draw meaning from their responses and see if their thoughts are shared by others in the coaching community.
The interview guide was refined in graduate level research methods and interpretations of qualitative research methods classes. It was then given to football coaches at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The primary researcher has a past working relationship with the staff there and sought their help to make sure that the wording to the questions was clear; most of the IUP coaches have experience as assistants (professional or graduate) at the FBS level. This method ensured that all participants understood and answered the same questions so that no data is collected that is unrelated to the responses of other participants.

In this study, data was analyzed in a manner consistent with Patton’s (1990) strategy for analyzing qualitative interviews. Data analysis started with a verbatim transcription of each interview by the primary researcher. Once all of the interviews were transcribed, data organization began with the primary researcher reading all of the interview transcripts to make sure that no open gaps or missing pages are present in the transcripts. For issues that arose, the primary investigator went back to the original recording/submission and made efforts to contact the interviewed coach to remedy the situation.

The next phase of analysis is what Patton (1990) refers to as content analysis. During this stage of analysis, transcripts were read multiple times and initial coding was done by the primary investigator. This coding involved the primary investigator writing his thoughts and comments in the page margins that summarize the key parts of a coach’s response that he considered beneficial to answering the research questions of this study. During the initial coding process, the primary researcher met with his advisor, an experienced qualitative researcher, to discuss the meaning units and codes that he is identified in his content analysis of the interviews and to “cross-check” his analysis (Johnson, 1997).
Inductive analysis was the next level of analysis used in this study. In this level of analysis, “. . . patterns, themes, and categories of analysis . . .” that come from the initial coding of the data are identified (Patton, 1990, p. 390). Themes were constructed from the words of the participants as the researcher studies his own margin comments and participant responses more thoroughly. Identifying themes within each transcript allowed the researcher to gain insight into what the practice of over-signing meant to each of the study’s participants. Once themes are identified within each interview, an analysis took place comparing and contrasting each coach’s themes with those of the other coach’s. Throughout this process, themes were constantly produced and re-created. The themes that were constructed answered the primary research questions of this study.

Significance of the Study

This study will attempt to unearth views of coaches and professional staff members working within college football regarding how to best keep scenarios like the one’s mentioned above from occurring. While at the same time, these views might help to foster a change in attitude regarding the ethics and morals of college football recruiting. This study is important because the potential results of this study could make the lives of collegiate athletes safer and more secure in the future. This study is also important because very little research has been done regarding the issue of over-signing. The current literature regarding this topic comes from sports writers, college football coaches, and university presidents. Protecting collegiate athletes should be the main priority of the NCAA and research studies such as this have practical application to the NCAA’s mission.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is evidence showing that sports, especially intercollegiate sports, play a vital role in shaping of American culture. Former NCAA President Myles Brand has said, “Americans love their sports. … It should not be doubted that sports have a central place in American popular culture. There is great interest in professional teams; but nothing rivals interest in intercollegiate athletics” (Brand, 2007, ¶1). The rapid growth and popularity of college football, as well as the recent launches of new sport networks (i.e. NBC Sports Network, CBS Sports Network, & FOX Sports 1), have served, in-part, as catalysts for the recent conference realignment shifts that have recently occurred as well as the increase in broadcasting rights revenue for the major Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) conferences (Chi, 2012): Pacific-12 (PAC-12), 12 years - $3 billion dollars; Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), $155 million per year; and the Big 12, $130 million per year. In addition, the University of Texas negotiated a 20-year, $300 million dollar deal with ESPN to create its own network (Smith & Ourand, 2011).

A recent USA Today newspaper study of 228 intercollegiate athletic departments found a total of $6.2 billion dollars was spent on intercollegiate athletics in 2010 (Berkowitz & Upton, 2011). In addition, this same study found the University of Alabama’s Athletic Department brought in approximately $26.6 million dollars in revenue (after expenses) for fiscal year 2010. However, not all schools experienced the same positive results as the University of Alabama. Berkowitz and Upton’s (2011) work found that just 22 of the 228 schools analyzed generated enough money to cover expenses in 2010. Understanding the popularity of sport in this country combined with the cost of having top level collegiate sport is vital to understanding the issues
faced by the coaches and administrators when making decisions; in the case of this study we are referring to recruiting decisions.

Peale (2013) says that college sports create undeniable campus pride and identity, but spending on athletics over the past five years has increased and that has led to universities allocating funds towards athletics that would otherwise be used on academic and student services. The University of Cincinnati and Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, for example, added $6 million and $1.2 million, respectively, this year to prop up their already heavily subsidized sports programs and keep up in the national arms race (Peale, 2013). Kirwan & Turner, (2010) report that according to the NCAA, over the past decade, spending on athletics has been rising at a rate three to four times faster than the rate of increase of academic budgets among institutions competing in the NCAA’s Division I. They further state that the data shows that athletics-spending growth is out-of-balance with growth in academic spending.

The breaking point may have been reached as schools are making questionable decisions to finance football while neglecting academics (Peale, 2013). A few examples of this can be seen at Miami (OH) where they’ve cut hundreds of jobs during the past several years and taken $50 million out of its overall budget, but want to raise $80 million from private donors to be used, in part, on sport scholarships and athletic facilities. Peale also writes about how odd it is that Northern Kentucky University, a school where students and taxpayers pick up $8.5 million of the school's $10 million athletic budget, can't afford a new center to house nursing and other growing programs, but it can expand into Division I sports.

The Recruiting Process

The effort by colleges and universities to attract new players is known as recruiting. College football programs devote an enormous amount of resources (money, time, human
capital, etc.) towards the persuasion of high school football players to attend their schools (Dumond, Lynch & Platania, 2008). To compete viably for participation in the lucrative BCS bowl games as well as conference championship games, college football teams need to generate success on the playing field. To that end, schools battle over the input factors in a football production function, namely, coaches and players (Dumond, Lynch & Platania, 2008). College football recruiting essentially is a competition between the nation’s top football programs to acquire the most talent. The recruiting process is very time consuming and can be very stressful and rewarding all at the same time (Feldman, 2007; Martinez, 2004).

Kitchen (2012) wrote that the building of relationships between high school players and college coaches can technically begin on the day the athlete starts to play high school football, though it is starting to occur much earlier. However, the actual recruiting process generally starts the summer of the athlete's junior year. It is during this time that some athletes create a highlight film DVD or online web profile that they can send out during the summer to schools he is interested in. This is done so that he can get schools interested in him so that they can come out and see him play during his senior year. It should also be noted that many universities also use recruiting services as a way to get film on players (Jessop, 2013).

As current CBS college football analyst Bruce Feldman writes, college football recruiting operates on its own year-round schedule independent of football season (Feldman, 2007). In Feldman’s 2007 book he describes all aspects of the recruiting season which include the scholarship offer process, film study, summer camps, traveling, coaches attempting to maintain personal relationships with recruits, official recruiting visits, and unofficial recruiting visits. These visits allow a recruit to observe the football program, meet prospective teammates/fellow
high school players, meet the coaching staff, and gather information about academic programs offered by the university (Feldman, 2007).

At some point during the process, the school may offer a scholarship to the player, which covers tuition, books, and housing. Alternatively, a school may ask players to “walk on,” meaning that they are invited to join the team, but not afforded financial assistance. The costs incurred by schools in the recruiting process are substantial—the average institution spent $526,000 in 2001 and those numbers have continued to escalate (Wieberg, 2003). According to NCAA rules, schools are prohibited from offering additional incentives to recruits beyond a scholarship, such as cash, vehicles, or promises of employment to the collegiate athlete or their family members (Dumond, Lynch & Platania, 2008).

Prospective collegiate athletes may receive scholarship offers by coaches representing interested college football programs. Once an offer is made, prospects may verbally commit at that time or officially commit on National Signing Day by signing a National Letter of Intent (NLI). Despite the fact that it is known as National Signing Day it is not the last day that a recruit can sign an NLI but rather the first day that a recruit can officially make his verbal commitment a binding one. It is not uncommon for prospects to verbally commit to a school after receiving an offer and then later de-commit before National Signing Day to accept an offer from another program. This fact must be remembered when discussing over-signing in college football as coaches might be over-signing for fear of prospects flip on their commitments. However, once a National Letter of Intent is signed, the recruit is committed to that program unless he is granted a release.

There are several influencing factors that students consider when making their college selection. Galotti and Mark (1994) found that family and friends have the most influence in the
college selection process. Canala and Dunlap (1996) later reported that academic reputation, areas of study and teacher quality were among the important factors for students selecting a college. The previously mentioned statistics apply to the common student. However, when we look at Cooper (1996) we see that athletes list the relationship that they had with a coach among their most important factors that lead to their decision to attend an institution. The athletes also listed the coaches’ commitment to the program, and the particular style of play adopted by the team as other important decision making factors. It is sad to consider that when over-signing a class a coach will potentially end up hurting a player that committed to the school based solely on his relationship with that coach.

During the recruiting process, location and past success are important elements to be considered. Rooney (1987) examined the quality of the college football player pool by state (measured in terms of NFL players from each state) and found that major college football programs located in or near states with a relatively small amount of competition tend to recruit better than other football programs. That is, schools that are closer to quality recruits will be able to learn about, contact, and woo these players at a lower cost and therefore might be more successful in eventually signing those players. Langelett (2003) used data related to the quality of recruiting classes and found a feedback system: Schools with success on the field are able to attract quality recruits; which in turn increases the quality of future performance.

The National Letter of Intent

The National Letter of Intent (NLI) program is governed by the Collegiate Commissioners Association (CCA), which is a 32-member panel of comprised of Division I conference commissioners (Sherman, 2014). The NLI is a binding agreement between a prospective collegiate athlete and an NLI member institution. Within this agreement are two
main components: 1) A prospective collegiate athlete agrees to attend the institution full-time for one academic year (two semesters or three quarters); and 2) The institution agrees to provide athletics financial aid for one academic year (two semesters or three quarters). The basic penalties for not fulfilling the NLI agreement require a collegiate athlete to serve one year in residence (full-time, two semesters or three quarters) at the next NLI member institution it attends and the athlete loses one season of competition in all sports (National Letter of Intent, 2014b).

The NCAA manages the daily operations of the NLI program while the CCA provides governance oversight of the program. Started in 1964 with seven conferences and eight independent institutions, the program now includes 635 Division I and Division II participating institutions. The NLI is a voluntary program with regard to both institutions and collegiate athletes. No prospective collegiate athlete or parent is required to sign the NLI, and no institution is required to join the program (National Letter of Intent, 2014a).

By signing a NLI, a prospective collegiate athlete has agreed to attend the designated college or university that offered them for one academic year. Scholarship offers are renewable on a year-to-year basis. Pursuant to the terms of the NLI program, participating institutions agree to provide the collegiate athlete with financial aid, provided he or she is admitted to the institution and is deemed eligible for financial aid under NCAA rules for one full academic year. One important provision of the NLI program is a recruiting prohibition that is applied after a prospective collegiate athlete has signed his or her Letter of Intent. This prohibition attempts to prevent poaching of collegiate athletes by requiring NLI participating institutions to cease their recruitment of a prospective collegiate athlete once that athlete has signed a NLI with another institution (National Letter of Intent, 2014a).
The NLI has many advantages to both prospective collegiate athletes and participating educational institutions (National Letter of Intent, 2014a):

- Once a National Letter of Intent is signed, prospective collegiate athletes are no longer subject to further recruiting contacts and calls.
- Collegiate athletes are assured of an athletics scholarship for a minimum of one full academic year.
- By emphasizing a commitment to an educational institution, not particular coaches or teams, the program focuses on a prospective collegiate athlete’s educational objectives.

The NLI contains provisions that deal with a variety of elements such as a prospects initial enrollment in a four-year institution, financial aid requirements, provisions to satisfy the letter, basic penalties, early signing period penalties, information regarding the appeals process, how the NLI might become null or void, recruiting ban after signing, 7-day signature deadline, statute of limitations, impact of coaching changes, and coaching contact prohibited at signing (National Letter of Intent, 2014c).

Early Signing Period Debate

One way to possible prevent over-signing and coaches having to deal with the indecisiveness of prospective collegiate athletes might be to have an earlier signing day. Senior high school students are swept up in nationwide recruitment craziness during the final months leading up to February, whether they're committed to a university or not. By signing in November (or sooner), they would be rewarded for their work on the field and in the classroom with early security for the future (Donohue, 2014). Susan Peale, NCAA associate director of operations, said the continued acceleration of recruiting has led the Conference Commissioners Association (CCA) to consider an earlier date to supplement the long-existing date in February,
similar to the structure for basketball and other sports (Sherman, 2014). The issue is on the agenda when the 32-person CCA meets in June and it takes only a simple majority vote (17 of 32 commissioners) for the change to be approved (Cooper, 2014). The effort to add an early period has attracted a large amount of supporters and detractors alike as it requires coaching staffs to shuffle their order of doing things—a touchy subject for men who build their resumes through consistency on the field and the recruiting path (Donohue, 2014).

Peale thinks that everyone wants an early signing period and it's just a matter of trying to nail down what's the appropriate date for one. Peal said the NCAA recently surveyed coaches about an early signing period and found that many were supports of having such a period. Most of the disagreement, she said, involves the actual date (Sherman, 2014). The idea for an early signing period has gained support from many coaches like Mississippi State’s Dan Mullen, Notre Dame’s Brian Kelly, Miami’s Al Golden, Ole Miss’s Hugh Freeze, Georgia Tech’s Paul Johnson, and Texas A&M’s Kevin Sumlin. However, one hurdle remains in that despite these coaches all agreeing that an early signing day needs to exist they all have different ideas on what an early signing day might look like in terms of starting date, its impact of high school juniors taking official visits, and the involvement of prospects at summer camps (Carvell, 2014). All of the previously mentioned coaches suggested or supported a special provision for collegiate athletes who signed early to be granted a release from their letter of intent if there was a coaching change between the early period and regular February period (Carvell, 2014).

Although Peale believes that most of the disagreement centers on the actual start date, many coaches have spoken out against having an early signing period for reasons other than the start date. Stanford coach David Shaw recently said that "I might be alone in this, but I think it's terrible. The reason for the discussion, in my opinion, is coaches don't like when kids commit
and switch late” (Hinnen, 2014a, ¶3). Shaw’s biggest concern is his beliefs that if a kid wants to change his mind late after the early signing period, he's going to appeal and that appeal is going to go through because the committees that decide those appeals tend to side with the collegiate athlete. Additionally, Shaw said the early signing period would be particularly difficult for academically demanding schools -- like, say, Stanford -- who are often unable to guarantee a recruit his admission to school until after the fall semester of his senior high school year. (Hinnen, 2014a). Shaw is not alone in thinking the way that he does as several SEC coaches are not in favor of changing the recruiting calendar. Kentucky's Mark Stoops recently said, "If things start moving up, it changes the way we've been doing things for a long time” (Sherman, 2014, ¶11). Fellow SEC coach Mark Richt of Georgia echoed the statement issued by Mark Stoops when he said that "I always say 'be careful what we ask for" because I don't know what that will do to our recruiting calendar ... I'd be afraid to change it. I don't want to turn the regular season into such a recruiting frenzy that you can't even coach your team on a weekly basis. I enjoy coaching football, too” (Hinnen, 2014b, ¶3).

What Fans Care About

The increase in growth and the popularity of college football has led to a fan base that might be more focused on the product being produced and not caring about how it is produced. Splitt (2005) and Telander, (1989) both write about how they believe Americans view college athletics. Their views would seem to conclude that if you were to ask many Americans about big-time college sports and they will be willing to tell you three things: first, it’s great entertainment; second, they know most schools cheat; and third, they don’t want to be bothered with the details of issues such as the corruption of college football and related reform efforts.
Jay (2004) writes that the need to win has created a fascinating duality in American sports. “In general, Americans tend to overlook the sometimes seamy underside of the sporting world as long as teams and athletes are winning” (pg. 4). She later writes that “universities have increasingly become more commercialized, win-at-all-costs programs that see athletic success as an essential part of campus life” (pg. 36). A lot research has been done through the years to determine what factors influence a high school senior’s decision to apply to various institutions and one persistent factor has been athletic success. Research shows that 75% of students felt that sports/extracurricular programs were either very important or somewhat important in choosing an institution to attend (Canale and Dunlap, 1996). The impact of sport to perceived external prestige has been observed at the university level, where perceptions of prestige have positively impacted student loyalty and satisfaction (Alves & Raposo, 2010) and have been shown to be the strongest predictor of positive student attitudes (Sung & Yang, 2008).

One reason that a student might choose to attend a school is because they desire to attend an institution with winning programs that participate in big-time college athletics. Cialdini et al. (1976) have done research where they discuss the link between fans and their teams showing that individual members/fans often identify more-highly with groups or organizations perceived as successful. If a fan chooses to identify themselves with a winning product in order to feel good about themselves or their institution, their behaviors are in-line with social identity theory (SIT). The SIT is where an individual’s need to maintain a positive self-esteem is built upon maintaining membership in positively-perceived social groups (Tajfel, 1978). In the context of this paper, the successful group that students are attempting to identify with would be there college football team.
Students and fans that attach themselves to a team not only are trying to place their identity in that team but are sometimes looking for the sense of community (SOC) that being a diehard fan of a team can bring. While feeling like a part of a community is important in its own right in terms of improving life quality, colleges and universities also view it as an important means to attract, and particularly to retain students. Over the past century, colleges and universities have invested significant sums of money in their football programs in large part because football is thought to impact SOC and ultimately student recruitment and retention (Toma & Cross, 1998). Students’ SOC increases the attractiveness and support of a campus, and consequently their desire to remain at that university (Hausmann, Scholfield, & Ward, 2007). The sport of football has been one of the main sport choices for creating a campus-wide SOC for students and fans.

Media Coverage of Over-Signing

Felder (2012) states that over-signing is bad and that if you’re against over-signing for the sake of the kids then more power to you. He made that statement in an article he wrote discussing how some believe that over-signing is what has allowed the Southeastern Conference (SEC) to become so powerful. He discusses how in 2006, 2008 and 2009 Ole Miss signed classes of 30, 31, 37 collegiate athletes. Alabama signed a 28 man class in 2009, and then LSU followed up by signing 29 in 2010. Some believe that over-signing is what has presented the SEC with the competitive edge that they seem to currently possess. Felder counters that argument by stating that one only needs to look at the transfer numbers, dismissals, and non-qualifiers experienced by SEC programs over the last several years and that we’d be able to see that those extra players are not the cause for SEC dominance. He clarifies his comments by stating that his views should not be taken as a defense of over-signing and that he views over-
signing as a heinous practice that should most certainly be stopped. Felder is not a supporter of over-signing because he believes that it is unfair to the collegiate athletes involved, not because it has given the SEC a perceived competitive advantage.

Rachel Bachman (2011) disagrees with Felder. Just prior to the 2011 national title game featuring Alabama v. LSU she wrote an article addressing how both teams were not only guilty of over-signing but also gaining a competitive edge from doing so. She writes that:

This tactic, called ‘over-signing,’ helps teams by giving them more options. Alabama has signed 137 players over the past five years, for an average of 27.4 per year. It signed 32 in 2008—a class that included nine starters on this year's team, plus Heisman Trophy winner Mark Ingram. This total places Alabama among the top five nationally in over-signing. LSU has signed 126 players over the same period, which works out to 25.2 per year. That number is considerably lower than Alabama’s but higher than many other top teams. Texas athletic director DeLoss Dodds, whose football team has signed just 112 players over five years (25 fewer than Alabama) said over-signing is "certainly an advantage." (Bachman, 2011, ¶4)

Her view – which is supported by the Texas Athletic Director – is that over-signing has allowed schools that over-sign to gain an unfair competitive advantage against other FBS schools. Though competitive balance is not an issue that typically comes to mind when discussing over-signing, the literature and views of those currently coaching against teams that over-sign would indicate that it should be a more talked about issue (Bachman, 2011).

In order for an argument to exist that over-signing presents schools with a competitive advantage a case must be made that schools that do not over-sign are then left at a disadvantage (Gordon, 2011). Such a case has been made by former LSU and Indiana head football coach
Gerry DiNardo (Gordon, 2011). When discussing recruiting at a school in the Big Ten, DiNardo talks about how different and disadvantaged he felt. DiNardo says, "At LSU, I could do whatever I wanted. The athletic director trusted me. If I signed 30, he knew I would be at 25 when I had to be. There was always a way to manage to numbers" (Gordon, 2011, ¶5). Then in 2002, when DiNardo was hired by Indiana, he had to adhere to the recruiting rules of the Big Ten which was known for having the most restrictive rules against over-signing of all the major conferences.

The Big Ten Conference abolished over-signing in 1956. In 2002, the Big Ten Conference modified the abolition of over-signing and created a rule that states in football an institution may have no more than 3 initial offers in excess of its institutional limit outstanding at any time. This means that in football a Big Ten Conference school may over-sign each recruiting class by three collegiate athletes, as long as they are under the eighty-five person scholarship limit for football by the beginning of the season (Bateman, 2011).

Under the Big Ten’s recruiting model DiNardo found that he could sign only the number of players that would bring him to 85. "The Big Ten puts itself at a competitive disadvantage," DiNardo said. "You would never be at 85. When I got to Indiana, the numbers were awful. We had 50-some players on scholarships. My only chance to catch up was to over-sign" (Gordon, 2011, ¶9). In DiNardo’s case, the use of over-signing was not to try and gain a competitive disadvantage, but instead try and avoid being competitively disadvantaged.

Infante (2012) wrote that the idea of following the SEC’s recruiting model is foolish. Infante instead purposed that the NCAA eliminate the limit on initial counters and adopt a Big Ten-style over-signing rule based on the 85 overall counter limit. That would give coaches greater flexibility by removing one limit and basing any signing limit on the more fundamental of football’s two scholarship limits. The problem is that in the current environment, the Big
Ten’s rule does not scale. When looking at when an athletic scholarship ends there are actually two possibilities. One is that scholarships end when the period of award is over, which for a long time has been a maximum of one year. But collegiate athletes have the opportunity to appeal any time their scholarship is reduced, not renewed, or cancelled until they exhaust their eligibility. Key to the Big Ten’s over-signing limit is evaluating why scholarships are ending and judging whether schools should be able to replace that collegiate athlete with a new recruit. The stability and uniformity of the Big Ten’s membership has made this workable. Whether it would work in a large conference with more fluid and diverse membership, such as the SEC, is questionable (Infante, 2012).

In 2009, Ole Miss signed a 37 player recruiting class. When asked about the excessive number by the media then Head Football Coach Houston Nutt responded with, "There's no rule that says that we can't sign 80, all I know is we have to have 25 ready to go in August" (Staples, 2011b, ¶2). In 2011 the NCAA instituted a new bylaw that Staples discussed in his article. Staples writes the following prior to National Signing Day 2011:

> When Football Bowl Subdivision schools across the nation begin signing football players on Feb. 2, they'll have to adhere for the first time to an NCAA Bylaw that limits them to 28 signees between Signing Day and May 31. Unchanged is the NCAA rule that declares schools can bring in only 25 new scholarship players each academic year. Also unchanged is the rule that allows schools to have only 85 total players on scholarship at a given time. So now that a nationwide rule governs signee totals, the morally shaky practice of over-signing should end. Shouldn't it? Not even close. The rule isn't worth the paper on which it's printed, and everyone in college football knows it. (Staples, 2011b, ¶4 emphasis added)
Staples believed that the new rule wouldn’t preclude coaches from over-signing because the new NCAA rule was structured around a pre-existing rule that the SEC had recently developed. The SEC rule had little effect on curtailing the behavior of its coaches, so Staples reasoned that any rule based off of it would have little power (Staples, 2011b).

Doyel (2010) wrote an article for CBS Sports in which he not only discussed the process of over-signing but also named players that have been affected by it. He mentioned how LSU head football coach Les Miles withdrew scholarship offers from three different players, one of them being Elliott Porter. Porter was a freshman offensive lineman from Waggaman, LA., who signed with LSU in February of 2010, qualified academically, reported to summer school in June and started taking classes. After two months as a member of the LSU football family, Porter was summoned from his dorm room to Les Miles' office to hear that he was going to be losing his scholarship. The NCAA allows a team to add 25 scholarship freshmen, and LSU had gone over that limit. Someone had to go, and that someone was Elliott Porter (Doyle, 2010). Another example occurred at Miami with head football coach Randy Shannon when he was able to recruit two of the best 15 recruits in the country, defensive back Latwan Anderson of Glenville, OH, and offensive tackle Seantrel Henderson of St. Paul, MN. Unfortunately, after securing their commitments he found himself over the 85-player limit, so he cut senior defensive end Steven Wesley, who had redshirted as a freshman at the coaching staff's request and then had his fifth-year senior season taken away (Doyel, 2010).

Towers (2011) wrote about how high school recruit Lorenzo Mauldin was hurt by the process of over-signing. Towers (2011) wrote that Mauldin accepted a scholarship offer from the South Carolina Gamecocks in July of 2010 and decided to stick to his commitment throughout the school year, deciding against taking official visits to other programs. But
Mauldin didn’t end up signing with South Carolina as expected. He found out via a letter faxed to his school the day before national signing day that the Gamecocks would not have room for him in their Class of 2011. South Carolina signed 31 players on national signing day and added one more — Jadeveon Clowney, the nation’s No. 1 prospect — on Feb. 14th. South Carolina had concerns about Mauldin being able to qualify academically so they moved on without him which would make some sense if we negate the fact that most the other prospects that South Carolina signed were facing the same issues that Mauldin was at the time. Mauldin is not the only player to have committed to the Gamecocks and then lose his scholarship offer due to over-signing (Towers, 2011). Linebacker Jordan Montgomery of Groveland, Fla., was also left hanging despite being committed for seven months.

In an article published on the NCAA website, Johnson (2011) wrote his views regarding coaching motivations behind over-signing, how over-signing can lead to greyshirting, and how the CCA views over-signing and greyshirting. Johnson wrote that from the coaches’ perspective there are many reasons/concerns for which a coach should be able to over-sign a class. Those concerns include the fact that recruits often sign a NLI and then don’t qualify academically, that recruits can change their minds about attending the school, that football is a physically demanding sport that creates attrition (i.e. injured athletes may have to quit/not return for a season), and that football has a high transfer rate amongst its athletes. Any of these occurrences could leave a coach with a shortage of athletes, but by signing extra prospects a coach can avoid being left short/devoid of talent. All of those concerns are real issues that coaches face, so they over-sign, but if the anticipated attrition doesn’t occur a coach can be left with more scholarship promises than actual scholarships.
Johnson (2011) wrote that in those situations, a prospect can elect – or be persuaded – to delay enrollment until the spring (a practice known as “greyshirting”). The spring enrollees then take the place of any fall graduates from the team, take advantage of spring practice and begin the next fall already conditioned and prepared for the season. In order to delay the start of their eligibility clock, athletes that decide to greyshirt will enrolling as a part-time student in the fall or might even wait until the spring. Susan Peal, who administers the NLI program, said the CCA does not support greyshirting. The program has a policy that nullifies the NLI if an institution or coach asks the prospective athlete to greyshirt. However, if a prospective athlete decides to delay enrollment, the national letter remains valid (Johnson, 2011).

Greyshirting and the Fear of Academic Ineligibility

Current University of Florida President J. Bernard Machen addressed the issue of greyshirting, which has a tendency to occur when the practice of over-signing, takes place in college football (Machen, 2011). Machen (2011) wrote, “Imagine the feeling if the student finds out, literally a few months before enrolling, that the institution is backing out of the contract. It is too late in the summer to go back to one's second choice. The student is told he will have to wait until next year. Sorry, but no acceptance, no scholarship. That's it” (Machen, 2011, ¶3). The contract of which Machen refers to here is the previously discussed NLI. Machen continues after that statement with, “In Division I college football this practice is known as ‘greyshirting’, and, unfortunately, there are universities that sanction this activity. The universities, with full knowledge of what they are doing, extend more athletic scholarships than they have. These schools play roulette with the lives of talented young people, and if they run out of scholarships, too bad. The letter-of-intent signed by the university the previous February is voided. Technically, it's legal to do this. Morally, it is reprehensible” (Machen, 2011, ¶4).
Machen’s problem with this system is that he believes that when a school enters into NLI’s with potential players, they’ve established a moral contract. Machen wrote that “universities must accept the moral responsibility to stop and prevent "greyshirting" and its associated actions. The football programs must be accountable and should honor institutional commitments to students. It is, after all, a moral contract” (Machen, 2011, ¶8). One reason that greyshirting has occurred is because of academic eligibility issues.

Deciding to implement academic plans would be one way to help eliminate coaches using the fear of academic ineligibility as a crutch to validate their behavior. Considering schools already have lowered their academic requirements to accommodate athletes, and still have special case exemptions, the fear of academic ineligibility should not continue to play a dominate role in the practice of over-signing.

Sack (2008) wrote that although all schools supporting big-time football programs lower their admissions standards for athletes, institutions with relatively high academic standards suffer a competitive disadvantage in that their admissions standards usually far exceed the NCAA's weak freshman eligibility requirements. Sack (2008) proposed that schools with high academic standards use NCAA minimum standards to offer two types of scholarships to athletes who are academically at risk. Type 1: Moderate risk recruits that score at least a 900 on the SATs (or an equivalent ACT score) and graduate from high school with a 3.0 grade point average enter the school's regular program for athletes. Type 2: Greater than moderate risk recruits that fall below the Type-1 academic threshold would be prohibited from participating in football program related activities during their first semester in college and thereafter if they do not achieve at least a 2.0 grade point average. Although Sack is proposing this idea to help out his alma mater,
it would be a great model for coaches to use that are recruiting athletes that they fear might not qualify academically.

Recently, University of Maryland football coach Randy Edsall proposed an idea to help coaching staffs deal with the situation of academic ineligibility. He believes that coaches should only offer scholarships to seniors. Under his proposal everything else about the year-round recruiting calendar would remain the same, like mid-spring evaluation periods and unlimited unofficial visits for underclassmen, but under Edsall’s plan, scholarship offers wouldn’t be allowed until Sept. 1 of an athlete’s senior year. Currently, schools can extend written offers on Sept. 1 of an athlete’s junior year (Prewitt, 2014). Additionally, Edsall wants to transfer the ability to offer scholarships from athletic departments to the academic side. In his plan, which hasn’t yet advanced beyond the idea phase and a recent conversation with NCAA President Mark Emmert, only a school’s admissions department would be allowed to extend scholarship offers. Each summer before prospects’ senior year of high school, college coaches would hand a list of desired recruits to the school’s admissions officers for vetting and approval. A scholarship would then be offered only if the recruit is deemed academically viable (Prewitt, 2014).

Pressures Faced by Those in Power

A logical question to ask might be if Machen and other university presidents find oversigning to deplorable, why would they allow it to occur? Duderstadt (2000) wrote that apparently, no one anticipated the horrific downside to putting athletics oversight in the hands of sitting presidents who are literally caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place— between a public demanding high quality entertainment from the commercial college sports industry they are paying for, and governing boards who have the capacity (and all too frequently the inclination) to fire presidents who rock the university boat too strenuously. Duderstadt
(2000) further states the presidents have not only been unable to stop the college sports enterprise from careering out of control, but, on the contrary, have contributed in large measure to building the colossal college sports entertainment business. In so doing they have secured their jobs by keeping their boosters and trustees as happy donors with tax benefits, legislators as enthusiastic supporters, and, most important of all, cashing in on the ocean of money generated by their sports business.

Another answer may be attributed to the fact that athletic success is important for an institution (i.e. media attention/exposure) and thus a few might need to be hurt or put in a bad position for the good of the university (Bremmer and Kesselring, 1993). Bremmer and Kesselring (1993) found that the primary form of media exposure (and advertising) for higher education institutions derive from a non-academic enterprise--intercollegiate sports. They found through their research and looking at other studies that the more successful an athletic program is the more media attention that institution can garner. Additionally, they wrote that since media attention on athletic programs is essentially free marketing for the university, it must be seen as a positive influence on the university. In many ways athletics is the main source of marketing for Division I institutions due to high fan demand and national TV coverage (Bremmer & Kesselring, 1993; Davies, 1994).

Athletics produces publicity over large areas through newspaper and television coverage of athletic events. A university would be hard pressed to find a more efficient and effective way of spreading its name and identity to the masses (Davies, 1994). Many administrators have made the realization that a winning team can provide an effective means of advertising their institution and securing much needed additional funding (Davies, 1994). Higher education is starting to reach a point where athletics, not academics matter most. The success of a school’s athletic
team(s) can mean additional funding, so institutions are starting to become more complacent with athletes that have poor grades as long as they’re making the school money or coaches that engage in morally reprehensible action (Imrem, 2008).

Clopton & Finch (2012) conducted a study to determine if a connection existed between athletic success and organizational identification and perceived organizational prestige from an internal perspective utilizing multiple measures of athletics success, university and team identification, and perceptions of university prestige among college students. Using responses from 633 students across 27 NCAA, Bowl Champion Series-level institutions, the study’s results found that broad-based athletics success impacted perceptions of external academic prestige, while high-profile athletics success in men’s basketball and football success did not. However, all measures of athletics success significantly contributed to perceptions of external athletic prestige and overall external prestige.

Stinson & Howard (2007) conducted a study where their results indicated, through analyzing private support/donation patterns that institutional academic reputation is often shaped by institutional athletic reputation. Their study found that total giving to schools with the strongest academic reputations was less susceptible to the changing fortunes of athletic teams than total giving to institutions not included in the top tier of academically ranked schools. Although higher ranked academic institutions are not as susceptible to the influence of intercollegiate athletics’ success on total giving, the shifting allocation patterns at all levels toward athletic giving suggest an increasingly important role for athletics at colleges and universities. Athletic success might not be directly related to academic giving, it does appear to influence the percentage of total charitable dollars donated to academics. Football tradition and
the winning percentage of the football team both have significant positive influence on giving to athletic programs (Stinson & Howard, 2007).

The ability to make money and promote the university are just a few of the benefits that football can provide a university, but fostering a sense of community is the most pervasive and consistent claim throughout the history of college sport (Chang & Canode, 2002). Research into whether or not football actually does promote a sense of community that aids in university-related outcomes (Satisfaction and Retention) shows that there was no meaningful relationship between football game attendance and the achieving those university-related outcomes (Warner et al., 2011). In an attempt to make athletics a viable part of the campus community and a successful institutional endeavor, an organization must first determine the level of significance they will be placing on athletics as well the institutional standards for equitable treatment and social justice that the athletes will be afforded (Tyler, 2000).

Ethics, Morals, and Values in College Football

Many of the decisions made within an organization are generally based off of what the standard operating procedures (SOP) are for that organization. A SOP is a set of written instructions that document a routine or repetitive activity. SOPs describe both technical and administrative operational elements of an organization that would be managed under a Quality Assurance Project Plan and under an organization's Quality Management Plan (EPA Quality System, 2008). Within college football, the SOPs for recruiting are based upon the ethics and the morals of the head coach and, on occasion, the athletic department. The athletic department’s mission statement at an institution might serve as the foundation for its SOPs.

Malloy, Ross & Zakus (2003) defined ethics, as the study of morals. It refers to that specific branch of philosophy that critically examines, clarifies, and reframes the basic concepts
and presumptions of ethical theories and of morality generally. The contemporary organization of
this branch of philosophy is comprised, roughly into two categories, metaethics and applied
ethics. Metaethics is more theoretical in nature as it trains its sights on the logic, coherence, and
presuppositions found in each ethical theory. In contrast, as the term suggests, applied ethics is
much more concerned with examining behavior in terms of right and wrong, good or bad,
authentic or inauthentic (pg. 55).

Malloy, Ross & Zakus (2003) defined morals as the term more often used when referring
to actions, behavior, and the principles that guide them. Technically speaking, morality is a
central concept of ethics but is not the whole of ethics. Morality often refers to certain principles
that seem to make absolute and universal claims. In contemporary times, moral is the term
applied to an individual’s actions. Through moral categories we can judge if that particular
behavior was right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or evil (pg. 55).

An institution uses its morals and ethics to formulate its standards for equitable treatment
and social justice. These standards are subjectively formed and maintained by the individuals,
groups, and institutions present (Tyler, 2000). Other influential factors that shape an
organization’s social justice structure are issues of power and status (as social roles), scarcity and
necessity of resources, and cultural socialization all inform fairness standards and procedures by
which related decisions are made. Thus, in contexts where power and status are hierarchical,
there is considerable concern for establishing and maintaining standards of social justice that are
free from bias and judged to be fair by all involved parties (Tyler, 2000). This statement can be
very applicable to college football programs where the football coach has become a powerful
person and thus the idea of questioning their recruitment policies may not be something that their
bosses (athletic director and/or university president) would be likely to do.
According to Splitt (2007) as a general rule, big-time university and college presidents cannot advocate true reform without risking termination driven by a storm of protest standards for equitable treatment tradition-based arguments by trustees/regents, wealthy boosters and alumni, as well as rabid fans. Further, and perhaps more importantly, there is the necessity of giving a voice to individuals and groups that possess lower levels of power and status, as they are most likely to suffer in situations where the standards of justice reflect inequity (Sartore-Baldwin & Warner, 2012). This idea would see the student athlete trying to be its own voice for social change rather than relying on university administrators or athletic coaches. In the context of collegiate sport a relationship occurs between an athlete and the institution that they play for whereby the athletes exchange their abilities and talents for university scholarship. In college football, players are the group with low levels of power. Their scholarships are only good for one year and then may or may not be taken away. It is because they lack power and status that they can be subjected to inequitable standards of justice.

Zenor (2013) wrote that beyond looking at the impact that athletic directors can have on coaching recruiting practice, we should also look at the environments that athletic directors are putting their coaches in. As referenced already in this paper, football is a multi-million dollar business for programs. The fact that football can generate a lot of money and publicity for schools is great for coaches because it helps to make their sport a priority in the eyes of administrators, but it is also a negative because of the intense pressure that is put on them to win and win now. The SEC is often discussed and talked about as the land of big egos, big stadiums and even bigger football budgets, and it has four coaches (Gus Malzahn at Auburn, Brett Bielma at Arkansas, Mark Stoops at Kentucky, and Butch Jones at Tennessee) -- who have agreed to contracts worth about a combined $60 million – that begun their first seasons in the conference at
the start of the 2013 season (Zenor, 2013). Malzahn plans on winning quickly at a place not known for patience. The previous coach, Gene Chizik, was fired just two years after winning that 2010 national championship. When universities are paying coaches millions of dollars their job securities become more about winning than how they treat their athletes.

Further proof that shows that coaches are receiving little patience from administrators can be seen in the recent hiring and firing trends in college football. Huguenin (2011) wrote that the 26 head coaching changes in the 2011 offseason were the most since the turn of the century; the second-most is 25 after the 2000 season. The 26 changes made the 2011 offseason the fourth offseason in a row with at least 22 new hires: there were 22 after the 2008 season, 23 after ’09 and 22 last season in ’10. Huguenin (2011) wrote that none of those new hires are getting much time. He states that of the 24 hiring’s made after the 2006 season, 17 already are gone (either fired or left for another job), there were 18 new coaches hired after the 2007 season, and 11 already are gone, six of the 22 coaches hired after the 2008 season are gone, and three coaches (Kansas’ Turner Gill, Akron’s Rob Ianello and Memphis’ Larry Porter) hired after the 2009 season already have been fired after just two years at their programs (Huguenin, 2011). When we think about that for a minute we realize that schools are firing coaches who, basically, had just one recruiting class of their own.

Since the 2000 season, there have been 238 coaching changes – meaning an average of almost two per school among the 120 FBS programs. There were 103 changes made from 2000-05 – and 83 of those coaches already have been fired or left on their own; that’s 80.6 percent. Huguenin wrote that using even more recent history as a mathematical guide, about two-thirds of the coaches hired this offseason will be gone by the time the 2016 season rolls around (Huguenin, 2011).
Governing Body Oversight

Although many players are negatively impacted by over-signing each year, help is on the way. In 2010 the U.S. Justice Department began an antitrust investigation into the NCAA rules that make scholarships renewable by schools on a yearly basis (Whiteside, 2011). Also, California passed legislation backed by the National College Players Association that would require recruiters to provide a written summary of their schools' policies on renewing one-year athletic scholarships and the amount of expenses not covered by those scholarships (Whiteside, 2011). National College Players Association President Ramogi Huma says that "Part of the problem is rooted in the one-year cap on scholarships," Huma believes that. "If we're able to get that cap eliminated, then schools won't have the flexibility to over-sign and run players off. Now, players can basically get fired for any reason" (Whiteside, 2011, ¶18).

New legislation has recently been introduced that requires colleges and universities to be more transparent in their recruiting process by requiring them to post important information concerning their recruiting and scholarship policies on the college or university’s athletic website. The purpose of this law is to educate collegiate athletes on the questions that need to be asked of recruiters and the information needed before accepting a scholarship offer. These laws mainly concern scholarship renewals, transfer regulations, and medical costs should an injury be a result of college sports. The law dictates that schools must be more transparent before signing a student athlete about what would happen should the student transfer in or out, get injured, or only play sports for part of their time at the college or university. This new legislation, known as The Student-Athlete Right to Know Act, is one form of a protection system in place for collegiate athletes. Commencing January 1, 2012, an institution of higher education that offers athletic scholarships must provide a hyperlink entitled "Student Athletes' Right to Know" on the
front page of its official athletic Internet web site, which shall be linked to a web page containing all of the following information: scholarship information, scholarship renewal information, medical expenses information, and release information (Office of Student Financial Aid Services, 2012).

To be awarded a legal remedy after over-signing occurs, a collegiate athlete should file a breach of contract claim against the school. A breach of contract claim against the school will only be successful if a court first finds that there is a valid contract between the collegiate athlete and the school. Historically, courts have generally found that a contractual relationship is created between the collegiate athlete and the school during the NLI process because both parties sign the financial aid agreement that accompanies the NLI (Bateman, 2011). By over-signing a recruiting class and subsequently refusing to provide an over-signed collegiate athlete with his or her financial aid in a given academic year, a court will probably find that the school breached its contractual duty to the collegiate athlete. However, it could indirectly lead to unreasonable hardship to a third party if the school is forced to retract financial aid from another collegiate athlete and give it to the over-signed collegiate athlete to comply with the NCAA’s eighty-five person scholarship limit on FBS teams. This would not be fair to that collegiate athlete and would undoubtedly cause that student the same substantial hardship that the over-signed collegiate athlete suffered (Bateman, 2011).

Unfortunately, in regards to oversight help from collegiate governing bodies, athletes are receiving no help from the NCAA or the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA). Fondren (2010) wrote after her personal communication with an NCAA representative that the NCAA is more concerned with what coaches “do” (e.g., economic compensation, contact violations, recruiting violations) rather than what coaches “say” to prospects. The AFCA is also
not very active in trying to curtail the actions of coaches from misleading recruits. Barnhart (2003) writes that although it has not happened in the last sixteen years, the AFCA can suspend a member coach from its organization for knowingly lying to or misleading prospective collegiate athletes. So according to Fondren (2010) and Barnhart (2003), the NCAA and AFCA do not really care about what deceptive tactics coaches might be using.

According to Infante (2013), the NCAA has an obligation to create national rules on over-signing that make it clear that hoarding players and playing games with the numbers to gain a competitive advantage through highly unethical behavior has no place in the sport they regulate, that every recruit and current player in every conference will be protected from forced attrition, and that every conference competing for BCS bowl spots and the money that comes with it will be on equal footing when it comes to the number of players they can recruit and sign. Imagine if conferences then got creative and made new rules that allowed for an appeal to the conference office when a scholarship is cancelled or not renewed, required conference schools to renew scholarships within the first week of school, almost creating two-year scholarships, or limited the ability of conference schools to refuse permission to contact other schools under certain conditions (Infante, 2011).

The AFCA’s Code of Ethics states that: (1) those who select football coaching must understand that the justification for football lies in its spiritual and physical values and that the game belongs, essentially, to the players, (2) the welfare of the game depends on how the coaches live up to the spirit and letter of ethical conduct and how the coaches remain ever mindful of the high trust and confidence placed in them by their players and the public, and (3) coaches unwilling or unable to comply with the principles of the Code have no place in the profession (American Football Coaches Association, 1952). According to the AFCA, it would
seem that they believe that the most important responsibilities that a coach can have include realizing that football is about the players, that coaches owe an obligation to the players who trust them, and that failure to comply with these responsibilities means that individual should not be coaching.

Even the bylaws enforced by the NCAA have proved ineffective. NCAA bylaw 13.9.2.3 titled “Limitation on Number of National Letter of Intent/Offer of Financial Aid Signings—Bowl Subdivision Football” states that in bowl subdivision football, there shall be an annual limit of 25 on the number of prospective student-athletes who may sign a National Letter of Intent or an institutional offer of financial aid from December 1 through May 31. The exception to that bylaw, 13.9.2.3.1, titled “Counter During Same Academic Year” states that a prospective student-athlete who signs a National Letter of Intent or an institutional offer of financial aid and becomes an initial counter for the same academic year in which the signing occurred (e.g., midyear enrollee) shall not count toward the annual limit on signings.

With the previous rules mentioned above in place Alabama signed a 27 player class in the 2014 recruiting cycle. If we take an in-depth look at their roster to end the season and compare it to their incoming recruiting class we can discover the over-signing problem is still an issue. Of the 85 scholarship players on Alabama’s roster at season’s end here are the number of players lost since the season ended; 7 fifth year seniors, 4 fourth year seniors with exhausted eligibility, 5 players declared early for the draft, and 2 scholarship transfers. That totals up to a total loss of 18 athletes. That means that if you add their 27 player recruiting class your roster now has 9 more players than it should. It’s also important to note that Florida State University backup quarterback Jacob Coker transferred to the school this spring making the roster significantly
more crowded (Slice of Life, 2014). Nothing has happened to stop the process of schools oversigning their rosters or recruiting classes from continuing to occur.

Summary

The recruiting process is known to us through the available literature as a college university supported financial process that can be very long and stressful for both players and coaches. College football is a popular sport and universities use popular sports as a way to recruit the general student body. One reason that athletics are supported by universities is because they can help college students feel like they are part of a community and that they go to a good academic school.

The people in power within big-time college sports feel pressured to win now and thus might sacrifice personal ethics or morals in exchange for continued job security. One form of sacrifice that a coach might make is to over-sign their recruiting class/roster, which is generally negatively viewed by the media. Writers feel that schools that over-sign are doing so to gain a competitive advantage, intentionally hurt recruits, and that current NCAA rules protecting against over-signing are too weak to make an impact.

Coaches might feel pressured to over-sign if they believe a committed player might not meet academic eligibility standards or that falling to over-sign a class will leave them with a thin roster at the end of a recruiting cycle. Regardless of the reasons for over-signing, there is little doubt that over-signing has negatively impacted college/prospective athletes. This study aims to determine why coaches choose to over-sign, and also to see if coaches have ideas on improving the current college football recruiting system so that it works for them as well as the athletes.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

To understand what the influential and motivational factors are involved in a college football coach’s mind when over-signing a recruiting class or their roster, this study will utilize a qualitative method. This type of method will allow me to interpret meanings drawn from the responses of my participants (McMillan, 2012).

Research Design

The primary research questions of this study are: (1) what motivates coaches to engage in the practice of over-signing?, (2) when coaches are recruiting, to what extent do they concern themselves with how their actions might affect other players?, and (3) what changes need to/should be made to improve the current college football recruiting system? In order to answer the primary research questions of this study coaches and professional staff currently working at the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level were interviewed and asked to answer questions pertaining to over-signing.

A total of 17 coaches/professional staff took part in this study from 9 of the FBS conferences: the American Athletic Conference (AAC), the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference, the Big 12 Conference, Conference USA, the Mid-American Conference, the Mountain West Conference, the PAC 12 Conference, and the Sun Belt Conference. The coaches that took part in this study were coded prior to analysis so as to protect their anonymity.

Originally, the plan was to contact recruiting coordinators at the BCS level, which was initially meant with a low response rate. All coaches and professional staff working in college football were then contacted to participate in this study. Beginning fall 2014, there will be 128
schools participating in college football at the FBS level. Emails were sent to coaches and administrators at the 89 of those schools. The remaining 39 schools were not involved because they either do not make the email addresses for their coaches and administrators available online, their email system rejects domain names not affiliated with that university, or because the team was undergoing a coaching change and had yet to update their staff directory. Individuals at 24 of the schools responded to the initial contact email either expressing a desire to participate or be removed from future mailing lists. Considering the importance of college football recruiting, it was found that everyone associated with the football team has a part that they play in recruiting.

An interview guide was created for use in this study allowed for the primary researcher to conduct semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interview guide is structured in such a way that it allows participants to give opinions about the practice of over-signing. The questions that the respondents addressed required extensive answers in order to adequately respond to each question, which is why a qualitative study was the chosen research method for this study. The interview guide was first given to football coaches at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The primary researcher has had a past working relationship with the staff there and will seek their help to make sure that the wording to the questions is clear. This method attempts to ensure that all participants understand and answer the same questions so that no data is collected that is unrelated to the responses of other participants.

In this study, data was analyzed in a manner consistent with Patton’s (1990) strategy for analyzing qualitative interviews. Patton (1990) when discussing the challenges of qualitative interpretation stated “the challenge is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (pg. 372). Using Patton’s strategy – which
takes large amounts of data and breaks it down to its key themes was the chosen method of analysis for this study because of the amount anticipated responses the primary researcher expected to have.

Participants

In order to answer the primary research questions of this study college football coaches and professional staff at FBS schools were asked to take part in a study pertaining to oversigning. The participants all currently work in college football, which make them ideal candidates to discuss recruiting practices within college football. All coaches on a football team tend to have a role in recruiting, most of the time a coach is assigned a geographic area. This study initially targeted the recruiting coordinator position due to the fact that the person holding this position is usually more of monitoring who the team has signed, offered, and is bringing in for visits. However, it was learned that not all schools have a person with that title. Additionally, everyone involved in coaching and the personnel side of football is heavily involved in recruiting.

Assembling a list of possible participants was done by visiting the football website pages of all the FBS teams and recording the name and contact information of the possible participant for mass email merges using Microsoft Office. Some schools choose to not publicize the email address for their coaches, while other programs that were experiencing coaching transitions had failed to update their staff directories. Those programs were omitted from the study because the primary researcher had no way to find their email addresses to contact them. The participants were kept confidential if they chose to participate in the study. The consent form document was attached with the email containing the interview guide that was sent to the participants that indicated their desire to participate in the study.
Participant Profiles

Brief profiles of each of this study’s 17 participants are included below to familiarize readers with their personal backgrounds. In particular, their background in college football is detailed, along with their highest recruiting class number, and general demeanor towards the practice of over-signing. All participants were coded prior to their interviews (ex: CA 101) to protect their identities.

CA 101

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a power conference institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for five years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 27 players. He seemed very impartial to the practice of over-signing consistently referring to the practice as a necessary evil that all coaches have to deal with.

CA 102

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional and position coach at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for close to ten years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 25 players. He is adamantly against the practice of over-signing due to his belief that it can potentially keep that player from reaching his academic and athletic potential.

CA 103

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a power conference institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for less than five years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 25 players. He is
against the practice of over-signing because he believes that over-signing strongly hurts a player’s ability to get the education that they desired.

CA 104

This participant is currently a position coach at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for close to forty years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 25 players. He believes that there is nothing wrong with over-signing and that teams should engage in the practice.

CA 105

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional and position coach at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for close to ten years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 30 players. He seemed very impartial to the practice of over-signing. He was another coach that said the practice is a necessary evil in college football recruiting.

CA 106

This participant is currently position coach at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for thirty-five years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 30 players. He seemed very accepting of the practice of over-signing as long as the team’s that over-signed made sure to plan appropriately and continue to keep prospects informed.

CA 107

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for just under twenty years. The
largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 34 players. He seemed very impartial to the practice of over-signing.

CA 108

This participant is currently a position coach at a power conference institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for less than twenty-five years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 28 players. He is against the practice of over-signing.

CA 109

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for five years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 23 players. He seemed very impartial to the practice of over-signing.

CA 110

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for over ten years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 28 players. He believes that there is nothing wrong with over-signing and that teams should engage in the practice.

CA 111

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for less than fifteen years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 23 players. He believes that over-signing is appropriate only if done for the right reasons. Said that teams need to ask, “Why is it being done?” to determine whether or not it’s right.
This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a power conference institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for less than fifteen years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 27 players. He believes that over-signing is necessary if you want to compete for championships in today’s college football world.

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a power conference institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for twenty-five years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 33 players. He believes that over-signing is essential and appropriate only if done for the right reasons; players must be informed of the process.

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for ten years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 28 players. He seemed very impartial to the practice of over-signing.

This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for five years. Unfortunately, he was uncertain regarding how many players were in the largest recruiting class that he had ever signed. His online biography did not provide enough information to help determine that answer. He seemed very impartial to the practice of over-signing.
This participant is currently a college football personnel professional at a mid-major institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for close to twenty years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 34 players. He seemed very impartial to the practice of over-signing.

This participant is currently a defensive coordinator at a power conference institution. He has been involved in college football recruiting for close to twenty years. The largest incoming class that he has ever been involved with included 30 players. He does not support the practice of over-signing.

Data Collection Procedures

After contact was made with participants, interviews were scheduled. Since participants were scattered across the country face-to-face interviews were not possible with any of the participants. Some of the participants were able to be interviewed because of their work schedules (preparing for National Signing Day and spring football), so some of the data was collected via phone interviews and others were submitted from the coaches completing the interview guide and sending it back to the researcher. The preferred method for data collection was to conduct interviews so that it would allow participants to share their experiences in college football recruiting in their own words (Markula & Silk, 2011). For those coaches that completed and emailed back the interview guide, many of them offered deep thoughts that the researcher believes allowed them to share their voice. Through these collection procedures, the coaches and college football administrators were able to express their opinions on over-signing in rich detail.
The study required participants to either partake in a phone interview with the primary researcher or submit a completed interview guide. All participants were made aware of the fact that the researcher might contact them to ask clarifying questions during analysis. An interview guide was constructed prior to the interview, and acted as a semi-structured framework for the interview (See Appendix A for the interview guide). The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview structure, meaning that each participant will be asked some of the same questions, but will largely be given the freedom to express their thoughts and experiences with minimal guidance from the researcher (Markula & Silk, 2011).

In this approach, the researcher has permission to probe further, encouraging the sharing of specific instances and examples that may go beyond the scope of the interview guide (Markula & Silk, 2011). An example of this type of questioning would be asking the coach or college football personnel professional to describe their opinion regarding the recruiting process. A question, phrased like this, allows the interviewee to respond without feeling like they are being led in any certain direction. The respondent can then freely express their experiences, without feeling the need to address any certain aspects of it. In preparing the interview guide, any questions that served to expressly have the participant say that over-signing was good or bad were not utilized. This strategy, emphasizing a desire for participants to express their personal opinions, attempts to limit the expectations of the researcher, by eliminating questions that may possibly lead the participant in any one direction (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Before each interview, participants were asked to confirm that they had read and understood the informed consent form (Appendix B) that had been sent via email. Participants were then asked if they had any questions about the study and if not, to provide consent to be involved in the study. Each participant was also reminded that they could withdraw participation
or choose not to answer a question at any time. Participants were reminded that the interview would be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription, and that only the researcher and his committee members would have access to the original transcripts and audio recordings.

The interviews began with a series of background questions, functioning to break the ice, gain contextual information, and allow the participant to settle in to the interview and become comfortable with the researcher (Markula & Silk, 2011). Along with attempting to start an open-ended conversation, these first questions allowed the participant to describe his experiences in college football, his job title on the team he coaches/works for, and how they viewed the recruiting process. Those questions were followed by a series of questions asking each participant to define over-signing and offer their thoughts on why teams choose to/choose not to engage in the practice. Participants were given the opportunity at the end of the interview to share their thoughts on anything that they might have forgotten to say or wanted to add as a comment to their interview. Interviews averaged twenty-five minutes in length. Upon completion, each interview was transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. At this point, each participant was given a coach/administrator identity number to protect his identity that was used throughout the remainder of the study.

Data Analysis

According to Smith and Sparkes (2009), analyzing and interpreting participant responses is “an important and vibrant means to develop our understanding of people’s lived experiences of their sporting and everyday lives” (p. 10). The interview process allowed the primary researcher to gain a better understanding of coaching realities with recruiting that was used in the analysis of the data.
Data analysis, using Patton’s (1990) approach, starts with a verbatim transcription of each interview by the primary researcher. Once all of the interviews are transcribed, data organization began with the primary researcher reading all of the interview transcripts to make sure that no open gaps or missing pages are present in the transcripts. If any issues arose, the primary investigator consulted the original recording or made efforts to contact the interviewed/participant coach in an attempt to remedy the situation.

The next phase of analysis was what Patton (1990) refers to as content analysis. During this stage of analysis, transcripts were read multiple times and the primary investigator did initial coding. This coding involved the primary investigator writing his thoughts and comments in the page margins that summarize the key parts of a coach’s response that were beneficial to answering the research questions of this study. During the initial coding process, the primary researcher met with his advisor, an experienced qualitative researcher, to discuss the meaning units and codes that he is identified in his content analysis of the interviews and to “cross-check” his analysis (Johnson, 1997).

Inductive analysis was be the next level of analysis used in this study. In this level of analysis, “. . . patterns, themes, and categories of analysis . . .” that come from the initial coding of the data are identified (Patton, 1990, p. 390). Themes were constructed from the words of the participants as the researcher studied his own margin comments and participant responses more thoroughly. Identifying themes within each transcript allowed the researcher to gain insight into what the practice of over-signing meant to each of the study’s participants. Once themes were identified within each interview, an analysis took place comparing and contrasting each coach’s themes with those of the other coach’s. Throughout this process, themes were constantly
produced and re-created. The themes that were constructed answered the primary research questions of this study.

Trustworthiness

A unique challenge present in this type of research is establishing the trust needed to gain the participation of coaches that might fear that talking about an unpopular recruiting practice could jeopardize their standing with their employer. From the onset, the researcher worked to establish this necessary trust to conduct research with such individuals. An assurance of confidentiality was made clear to each participant at time of recruitment, in the consent form, and during any other subsequent communications with participants.

Measures that were taken to ensure confidentiality included coding any information that could link participants, their program, or their athletic department, or their university to this research. The researcher assured participants that all electronic documents would be stored on a password-protected computer, and upon completion of the project, all materials would be kept protected for a maximum of three years before being destroyed.

In a qualitative study like this one, the primary instrument is the researcher, and all the data is, therefore, filtered through my own personal lens. Markula & Silk (2011) wrote that as researchers we need to be cognizant of what paradigms we belong to when assessing data because it is our paradigm view that will help us shape our interpretations of the participants’ answer. A carefully constructed interview guide served as my tool in collecting data, but it is not a fully objective means. Rather, it can be seen as an extension of the researcher, and vulnerable to reflect my own personal stances. This is unavoidable when conducting this type of qualitative research. The primary researcher for this study falls into the humanist paradigm because he asserts that knowledge production is a subjective process and he tends to search for the one
universal reality. The primary researcher believes that all knowledge is the product of subjective processes and subsequently he is not okay with believing that everyone’s opinion is correct, thus he tends to seek to the universal lone reality in all situations.

Through developing a great rapport with the participants, the primary researcher feels comfortable that the information gathered, and the subsequent themes that emerged, serve as an accurate representation of how coaches and professional staff view the practice of over-signing. Some of the emergent themes aligned with the available literature supplied by researchers and sport journalists, but the majority of this study’s findings are unique. It is my belief that coaches and administrators appreciated the opportunity to clear up misconceptions that many have regarding the practice of over-signing. Additionally, several participants asked for a copy of the study when it is complete because they have an interest in seeing what other coaches said of over-signing. The participants were excited about this research as much as the researcher was in conducting this study.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Detailed conversations with college football coaches and administrators provided descriptions into what the recruiting process is like and why over-signing is used in recruiting and roster management practices. These conservation yielded six distinct themes: General Attrition, Fickle Recruits, Accepted Practice, Competitive Edge, Winning Emphasis, and Early Signing Day.

General Attrition

Of the seventeen coaches and administrators that were interviewed, the majority of them cited the need to over-sign in order to account for the various possibilities that can lead to attrition on their rosters. Football is a physically demanding sport that creates attrition (i.e. injured athletes may have to quit or do not return for a season), and the sport also has a high transfer rate amongst its athletes (Johnson, 2011, ¶4). For CA 110, an Assistant Director of Football Operations at a mid-major program, the practice of over-signing is seen as a necessity. He said that, “We need to over-sign in some sort of way to keep up with any kind of attrition either from graduation, turning pro, transferring or eligibility expiring. Additionally, we have to account for the fact that a couple of our signees might not qualify academically.”

CA 110’s comment exemplified a reoccurring point that six participants expressed in which they believe that over-signing is a sort of necessary evil. In some situations a coaching staff might over-sign because they have the additional NLI’s and, although they are returning more than 60 players on scholarship, it just makes sense, in their opinion, to protect themselves and their program. CA 105, a position coach and personnel professional at a mid-major program, stated as much when he discussed his reasoning behind over-signing. He said, “You
might over-sign because you have more NLI’s or Initials available than vacated scholarships (from graduated seniors or transfers) and you want to cover for the natural rate of attrition.” The natural rate of attrition is generally something that a coach is more aware about than the media covering their team.

The natural rate that CA 105 mentioned above traditionally is looked at as players transferring out of your program or deciding to leave early (Felder, 2012). Because players’ transferring has become such a common practice in the college football, many teams will over-sign their recruiting classes in anticipation of the end of the season exodus of discontented players. When asked to discuss how he viewed the recruiting process, CA 101, a Recruiting Coordinator in the Big 12, focused most of his answer on the topic of player transfers and the impact that it has on a team’s recruiting practices.

I see the recruiting practice as long and tiresome. It’s probably way too saturated to be quite honest. I think there is just way too much attention given to it. I think that is why you see transfers. You see more transfers now than you did 10 years ago and I think it’s in part because of all the attention these kids get in high school.

His view places the issue of over-signing on the athletes’ shoulders. The fact that college football recruiting has become so popular within the media likely has contributed to a group of incoming players that expect to arrive on campus and instantly start and become stars. When they do not play immediately, or just play sparingly, they might opt to transfer and see what other opportunities are out there for them. In such cases, the coaches now must find athletes to replace those departed players. Rather than what until a player decides to transfer to try and replace him, it might be prudent for a coach to over-sign so they already will have fixed that
issue prior to the transferring player’s departure. This ensures the coach has reached his numbers when referring to roster depth.

More important than just having 85 scholarship football players is making sure that you have the desired depth at every position that you need. Having desired depth is essential to the sustained success of a program. Over-signing is sometimes used in an effort to have desired depth at every position on the field (Gordon, 2011). Especially in cases where you believe that attrition might occur, over-signing can account for losing those players. CA 115, an Assistant Director of Football Operations at a mid-major program, discussed the importance of positional depth when he was asked why he thought teams over-signed.

There are multiple factors that contribute to over-signing, one such factor is academic standing because sometimes you have to wait until April to know if they’ll be eligible. Positional depth is also one because you may need an extra RB vs. the DL. Or you release multiple players while waiting on a Junior College player to be able to sign and come in the summer and help the team immediately.

If you lose a player because they decide to transfer, have medical issues, turn professional early, etc. then you might not have the ideal number of players at that position that you desire. Often, if a team needs to bring in an extra player at one or more positions you will likely offer several players at that position in hopes of securing a commitment from at least one of them. Sometimes the teams will tell those players that the first one to commit receives the scholarship. If they do not communicate that to the players then they might have more than the amount that they need commit. Even if you had to over-sign to get the options you now have, at least you have those options which is a position that many coaches and administrators prefer because having desired team depth is an optimal.
Although the majority of coaches spoke about attrition as if it is inevitable, a few of the coaches spoke about ways to prevent attrition. CA 102, a position coach and personnel professional at a mid-major program, talked about running a program the “right way” and recruiting the “right fits” for your program can prevent the need for over-signing in college football if your sole reason is to account for attrition.

…if you’re running your program the right way your retention rate should be pretty high. Now transfers happen and attrition happens – kids decide that they want to be closer to home, that’s it’s not a good fit, trouble with academics – those things all happen. If you’re routinely signing 28-32 kids it does not send a great message to the class of kids that you are recruiting now. I’m sure there are exceptions to what I’m talking about. Maybe a coach takes a new job and a bunch of players’ transfer, so they have more than 25 spots. But I think in general if you’re signing those kinds of numbers year-in-and-year-out than something is not going right in your program.

His argument against attrition uses that fact that appropriate roster management tends to be one way one to avoid attrition. He believes that even if you bring in 25 players per year, over a four-year period that would give you 100 players. Those additional 15 players should probably account for the players that you lose to attrition, as he said it happens, but you shouldn’t need to bring in 28-32 players every year. The caveat to his view would be if the roster has experienced a coaching change because then roster turnover should be expected. However, it shouldn’t be a consistent issue with that team that they have to sign 28+ players because then something is not going right with that program.

The comment made by CA 102 talked about how to prevent attrition from happening, but even if it does happen at least two participants spoke about how that shouldn’t lead to over-
signing. CA 111, a Director of Player Personnel for a Big Ten program, spoke about how his program does not over-sign and how they do not plan to do so in the future.

We discussed the possibility of over-signing this year for the first time. We just never did it before. It was that we had a small class, but we would have the scholarships open up in January, so we discussed the over-signing as greyshirt. We will never over-sign to account for someone not qualifying (all of our recruits easily qualify) and we will never over-sign as a contingency that we may have a transfer.

CA 111’s program chooses not to over-sign as a contingency plan in case of player transfers, which is definitely a decision that teams can make. Rather than recruit in preparation for players that *might* leave a team can wait to recruit athletes to replace places that *actually do* leave.

Following CA 111’s thoughts, CA 114, an Assistant Director of Football Operations for a program in the American Athletic Conference, works for a program that had its own unique philosophy. He said, “When we over-signed it was based purely on that signing class. If we didn’t think someone from that signing class would make it, then we would sign another to hit our number. We never over-signed knowing we would cut current players to make room for the new signees.”

They never over-signed to account for attrition, but instead would over-sign within a recruiting class. All of their recruiting actions were made based solely on the make-up of the incoming class. Granted, those decisions were initially based on the construction of the roster, but they were made accounting for what the roster actually looked like and not what it could turn into if players decided to leave. Their decision to be reactive rather than proactive is not common in college football recruiting. Rather than deal with roster issues as they happen, most coaches prefer to have the depth necessary to account for any troubles.
Fickle Recruits

Although much of the blame for over-signing gets placed on the coaches, there might be reason to attribute some to today’s players and the current recruiting system. In today’s recruiting world, prospects change their minds frequently (Johnson, 2011). CA 115, an Assistant Director of Football Operations at Conference USA program, mentioned the fickleness of recruit’s word when discussing his views on the recruiting process. He stated that, “From an administrator’s perspective the recruiting process is a long and stressful process. It’s a drawn out time where you are concerned about the actions of young people who could change their minds moment to moment.” Most coaching staffs try to show integrity and be men of their word within the industry. However, CA 115 is correct in saying that athletes have the ability to change their mind and, in some cases, they may commit to multiple schools in a recruiting cycle within a short window.

Even if a coaching staff wants to have integrity and not over-sign their recruiting class/roster they might have to do so just because they need to account for the fact that high school seniors and junior college players have fickle hearts/minds that seemingly can change at any moment. The fact that recruits appear to be fickle in their commitments to schools is definitely an opinion that CA 104, a position coach at a school in the Mid-American Conference, shared during his interview.

In this day and age with all of the decommitments why wouldn’t you over-sign? Here is the thing in recruiting that is critical. The biggest part of recruiting is hitting your numbers (i.e. we need three of these, we need two of those, etc.). If you need to bring in three offensive lineman and you only get one than that is going to come back and bite you in the ass in two years. I don’t understand how kids can commit their sophomore
year and then decommit a month before the letter of intent. The problem is that it’s rampant. It’s almost like the kid is challenging himself to see how many times he can decommit.

The importance of hitting your numbers is critical as failing to do so can hurt your team down the road. What CA 104 is really stating in his comments is that teams should over-sign because although it might mean that you as a coach are not always honest with recruits it’s okay because recruits are fickle and might decide to sign with someone else a month before signing day leaving you at a disadvantage.

The belief that kids are challenging themselves to see how many times they can decommit might speak to the fact that these kids want attention or that they are being forced to make decisions early (media pressures), but either way it still hurts the teams recruiting them. The topic of fickle recruits really resonated with CA 104 who went on to continue promoting over-signing in light of recruiting today’s prospective collegiate athlete that is possibly fickle and at any moment might have a change of heart.

I used to work for a coach that said these commitments are not hotel reservations. That’s where all this early offer and early commitment stuff has come into play. When I started, back in the stone ages, the whole recruiting process was only 2-3 months long. Kids would take their visits, make a decision, and sign a letter of intent three days later. Bingo, bango, bongo it’s all over. Now they’re committing 2.5 years prior to their signing day, which means they can change their minds 100 times. The real issue is that if I offer a scholarship to a player and then take it away then I’m a bad guy. However, if that player has been committed to me for months and I stopped recruiting their position and
then three days before signing day they choose to go elsewhere I’m left wondering where
to get my player.
As he said, if they stop recruiting a player’s position and then he opts to go elsewhere then that
team will be left scrambling to find a player at his position that they like and feel that they can
still enter the conversation for so late in the process. It’s also interesting that when a coach pulls
an offer he is seen as a villain, but when a recruit reneges on their commitment no one chastises
them except for maybe that team’s fan base on social media (McLaughlin, 2013).

CA 104 is not alone in his opinions regarding the fickle minds of prospective student
athletes. CA 105, a position coach and personnel professional for a Mid-American Conference
program, and CA 112, a Recruiting Assistant in the Big Ten, both expressed similar concerns
over the assurances that a recruit’s verbal commitment provides. When CA 105 was asked why
he believed certain coaching staffs over-signed he answered in a very simple and straightforward
way. He said that, “Those teams likely have uncertainty that another one of their verbal
commitments will hold true to their commitment, so they over-sign in order to protect
themselves.”

When asked to describe the recruiting process, CA 112 made a statement similar to CA
104 and CA 105 about how he didn’t like length of the process or how, in his opinion, you are
stuck recruiting the parents more than the kids because they are afraid to make decisions or to
stick to the one’s that they have made.

In my opinion, the recruiting process is too long. One of the things I do not like about
recruiting is dealing with parents. I understand that they are important in helping a
prospective student-athlete arrive at a college decision, but too often I find that recruiting
them is more about inflating their egos than focusing on their son. It can be frustrating
when the player likes us but is unwilling to commit until his parents feel we’ve made them feel wanted as well.

The involvement of parents in the recruiting process is important to the collegiate athlete, but can be challenging to the coaching staffs. In recent years, players have committed to schools and then either not attended because their parents did not want them to go there or they did attend but only after a long, drawn-out, and stressful process (Elliott, 2013). The previous statement speaks to the importance of building relationships during recruiting with both the parents and the prospective collegiate athlete.

Recruiting is a relationship-building process between coaches and players that involves a lot of trust. According to CA 102, a position coach and personnel professional at a mid-major program, the recruiting process is kind of like dating and losing out on players that you were pursuing can leave a coach feeling heartbroken or feel like they just went through a bad breakup.

The recruiting process is crazy. It’s a mess. I think that there are people who get the short end of the stick – both prospective student-athletes and colleges – and it’s a shame. It’s exciting when you sign a player that you think is the right fit and that man decides to come to your school and be part of your football program. That’s a rush! It’s like dating. I don’t know if this is a perfect analogy, but you get your heart broken a lot of times.

If a coach going after recruits is to be compared to dating, the result of the breakup can hurt the makeup of that coach’s incoming recruiting class. It also hurts the team if they needed that player for depth purposes and are now left scrambling to find someone to play that position. Since recruiting is a process where you can be hurt by recruits on multiple occasions many coaches choose to over-sign to either heal that hurt or minimize the potential impact that a decommit from a recruit might have.
Accepted Practice

Johnson (2011) wrote that from the coaches’ perspective there are many reasons/concerns for which a coach should be able to over-sign a class. The responses of this study’s participants seem to indicate that the coaches and NCAA agree with him and that it should be an accepted practice. CA 116, the Director of Operations for a program in the Sun Belt Conference, believes that over-signing must occur because of the way the recruiting calendar falls.

When you really look at, national signing day occurs before a player has finished meeting the NCAA’s requirements for admission. Since a lot of kids stay on the bubble for a while, over-signing is a necessary evil because it allows for us to guarantee that we are bringing in all the guys that we want rather than hope that everyone comes out eligible.

That would be ideal, but it doesn’t always happen.

CA 116 argument is that the NCAA wants teams to sign players to a binding contract (NLI) without knowing for sure whether or not they will be eligible. That is a big risk for a program to take, so they need to over-sign to protect themselves and make sure that they get enough athletes.

Over-signing is also viewed as an acceptable way for teams to deal with player discipline or academic issues. Over-signing serves as a protection for schools might have to lose a player due to poor academic performance, a career ending injury, and that may be expelled from the institution. CA 104, a position coach at a school in the Mid-American Conference, supported that statement during his interview twice.

I think that you have to over-sign for a number of reasons. Now you need to be prudent and have a plan of how you’re going to deal with the over-signing and the kids in your class…If you have a guy in your program that is facing a major discipline issue, is potentially going to fluke out of school, or is facing some serious injury recovery than by
all means you need to over-sign. You have to protect yourself from kids getting hurt, dropping out of school, or (God forbid) disciple issues.

Although the media sometimes paints over-signing in a negative light, coaches know that they need to use it in order to account for attrition. Since the practice of over-signing is widely known, it has become an acceptable practice within coaching circles.

Coaches also know that they exist in a results based profession that is constantly experiencing turnover (Huguenin, 2011). Over-signing has been used to remove players that are currently on a team’s roster and replace them with new young talent. CA 114, an Assistant Director of Football Operations for a program in the American Athletic Conference, is one participant that greatly supported the use of over-signing for that purpose.

For current players, if they are being cut to make room for new players then they probably weren’t thought of very highly by the coaching staff and should want to move on anyway. They had a shot to prove themselves and it didn’t pan out. I don’t feel as bad for them as I do an incoming player getting blindsided.

Just as the coaches exist in a results driven profession, players need to show results on the field or they risk being replaced. Coaches want players to earn their scholarship and if they find that a player’s performance in underwhelming then they can over-sign and being in a replacement to that player. From a football as a business standpoint this makes a lot of sense and is an acceptable reason to engage in over-signing. Furthermore, these collegiate athletes are adults and so it can be argued that not producing and subsequently being cut is similar to what they would experience if they were working fulltime instead of going to school.

One reason for the acceptance of over-signing is the belief that, although it has the potential to be a negative, it can also be a positive. CA 107, the Director of Operations for a Sun
Belt program, believes that and that the system currently in place prevents people from abusing the process.

I feel that over-signing can be both positive and negative from the standpoint that it allows more people to sign scholarships but negatively impacts the one(s) that may not be eligible. Over signing is prevented by the NCAA now. I believe you will see more of these limitations soon.

To some extent the NCAA has made attempts to limit over-signing – now you may sign only 28 NLI per recruiting cycle – but over-signing is still taking place (Slice of Life, 2014). Perhaps more limitations to over-signing will exist in the future, but there are some that do not want to see any more limitations. They actually would like the NCAA to not be involved.

CA 106, an Assistant Head Coach at a school in the Mountain West Conference, talked about wanting the NCAA to have a laissez faire attitude in how they govern the recruiting process. He would like a free market (a common theme that exists amongst more seasoned/experienced coaches). He stated that, “I don’t think that over-signing should be prevented. We need a free marketplace. A program should be allowed to make their own choices regarding over-signing and simply live with those consequences, good or bad.”

Interestingly enough, where CA 106 talks about wanting the NCAA to now be involved and CA 107 said that the NCAA’s involvement has been good and led to positive change, others think that nothing new has happened.

CA 102, a position coach and personnel professional for a mid-major program, showed perplexity when talking about the NCAA’s new rule regarding 28 counters because it is in place and highly visible, yet coaches continue to over-sign there is a lack of punishment for offenders.
His confusion surrounds the idea that rules should not be in place if there is nothing enforcing compliance to them.

Okay, I guess I will try to say this as politically as I can. I do not think that we should have rules if we are not planning to enforce them. If the rule is going to be that you can only sign up to 25 in a class than let’s enforce it. If we’re not going to enforce it – and it sure seems like we do not – then let’s not have the rule.

His belief that a punishment system is not in place to prevent over-signing seems to indicate that the practice is still acceptable to engage in because doing so results in no penalty.

Lastly, it can be argued that over-signing is an acceptable practice because the NCAA allows for it to occur even if it’s just to 28 counters. If the NCAA really cared CA 111, a Director of Player Personnel for a Big Ten program, believes that they would stress academics and graduation numbers.

I think if retention is serious to the NCAA and APR numbers matter than the NCAA should restrict it. Programs shouldn’t cover attrition through over-signing. You lose guys; you’ll have a few less scholarship players that season. But if retention is not that big of a deal, I don’t see what it hurts. Early enrollees and the ability to count scholarships “back” is basically asking programs to over sign. So until that legislation is changed, the practice won’t change.

The focus should be on retention and having player’s graduate. CA 111’s comments show that over-signing is a practice used to cover up for the loss of players through attrition, but he argues that more of an emphasis should be placed on preventing this attrition from occurring. Although you cannot stop a player from entering the draft early, you can help prevent a player from being a victim of over-signing due to academic reasons if help them succeed in the classroom.
Competitive Edge

One of the potential advantages of over-signing is that it can be used as a way to gain a competitive advantage or competitive edge for the schools that over-sign (Bachman, 2011; Felder, 2012). The participants in this study all stated, in some way, that even if you do not over-sign because you are trying to protect the kids that over-signing can be a great way to get ahead. Understanding the culture of recruiting, and college football in general is essential to learning why over-signing takes place.

CA 105, a position coach and personnel professional for a Mid-American Conference program, briefly described the recruiting culture when discussing his views on the recruiting process. He said, “The recruiting process is a constant & tireless ‘Arms Race’ that is ever evolving as staff’s continue to find innovative ways to sell their program and compile what is the lifeblood of any program – their student-athletes.” The lifeblood of a college football program is the athletes that compete on that team. To compete viably for participation in the lucrative bowl games as well as conference championship games, college football teams need to generate success on the playing field. To that end, schools battle over players (Dumond, Lynch & Platania, 2008).

Acquiring talent in recruiting is important, but acquiring elite level talent is more important. One reason that a team might look into over-signing is because they feel that it would land them an elite level prospect. During CA 105’s interview, he talked about the biggest reason that he thinks that teams over-sign; to get the star.

A team might over-sign if they find a great player who becomes available (maybe he was let out of a prior commitment, he decommitted from somebody else, or his game tape just recently came to the coach’s attention) that they think can really help them. Another
reason that a team might over-sign would be if they found a player that they thought was
great and wanted to commit to them despite the fact that they have already filled all their
commitments in the upcoming recruiting class.

Winning is everything in college football, so if a coach finds an elite player that is willing to join
his football program he is likely to try his best to figure out a way to have him on the team. That
player’s addition to the recruiting class might mean that they have too many counters, so that just
means that someone else will have to be released from their NLI.

Over-signing isn’t just done to bring in a known star, after all how many surefire stars are
there in every recruiting class. Another reason to over-sign is to give you the numbers you need
to succeed (Gordon, 2011). An argument made by CA 101, a Recruiting Coordinator in the Big
12, is that bringing in as many players as you can gives you the chance to find more potential
stars and ensure that you met all your positional depth needs.

I think that coaches over-sign because it gives them more cards to play. Recruiting is an
inexact science to begin with, so if you have more options on the table at the end of the
day than you have a greater chance of being successful. You end up signing kids in
February and then hope they qualify in June…it’s all about numbers. You got to have
depth if you want to win and be able to sustain injuries. The chances to have depth are
greater if you have more pieces to play with.

If you choose to over-sign and have more players you increase the chances that you landed a
possible star, improve your potential depth, and avoid running the risk of losing roster numbers
to players that do not qualify come June. If you do not over-sign you run the risk of having
landed few stars, weakened depth, and non-qualifying prospects.
CA 110, an Assistant Director of Football Operations for a program in the Mid-American Conference, stated the idea that over-signing is used for the purpose of increasing positional depth. He said, “In recruiting, you always recruit according to your needs or depth chart. If you over-sign you have the ability to ensure that your recruiting class matches up with your needs or positional opening on your depth chart.” Both CA 110 and CA 101 have the mindset that if you want to win you need to have depth on your roster and that over-signing is a way to make that happen. Even more important than having depth on your roster is having quality depth at every position.

Some coaches will over-sign, but only when it pertains to the incoming recruiting class. However, other coaches will over-sign if it provides them the ability to rid their roster or a malcontent or underperforming player. While discussing why teams over-sign, CA 108, a position coach in the Big Ten, mentioned how it can be used by a staff to force out players. He said, “Why do I think that some schools over-sign? I think that some schools use over-signing as a way to force out student-athletes that don’t fit the program or aren’t as talented as they were believed to be.” Forcing out students that do not fit the program could mean that the athlete was not a good scheme fit or character guy. Forcing out athletes that have underachieved can instantly improve the competitiveness of a team assuming that you have adequately replaced an underachieving player with a more talented one.

All of the previous points have to do with teams using over-signing to make themselves more competitive. However, over-signing can used to weaken a competitor even if it does not necessarily help the program that is over-signing. When discussing over-signing most people believe it occurs solely because greedy coaches want to collect as much talent as possible, but it also can occur because coaches are trying to keep talent away from their competitors. While
talking about the process of over-signing, CA 114, an Assistant Director of Football Operations at a school in the American Athletic Conference, made a point of connecting over-signing to a coach’s greed.

Over-signing is usually done in two circumstances: The first is if you know that you are recruiting a kid won’t qualify (which I think means that you shouldn’t be signing him in the first place). The second reason is greed (you are signing him simply so he doesn’t sign with your competitors).

Over-signing can afford a coach the opportunity to keep bringing talent while simultaneously keeping talent away from other competitors and that is one reason why it is sometimes practiced. Additionally, over-signing can be useful to coaches because they do not believe their current team has enough good players to win or if they just stepped into the head coach position for that team they can over-sign to overhaul their roster with talent.

Winning Emphasis

The recruiting process should be a relationship building process between players and coaches. Collegiate athletes choose to attend the institutions that they go to because they value the relationship that they have formed with a coach and they feel like they will be a good fit in the schemes deployed by that team (Cooper, 1996). CA 108, a position coach in the Big Ten, describes recruiting as a team building process of bringing in players to improve your talent and depth.

Coaches use the recruiting process as a way of building their team for the future. It can also be a way to sell and showcase your University to a group of people who may or may not have much knowledge about it. It’s a way to make your team better by adding better players or players at positions of critical needs.
None of the seventeen coaches that participated in this study offered a different definition of the process. All of their definitions were very business-like in tone. Football is a business where winning is required to maintain employment (Huguenin, 2011). Though none of the coaches ever made statements indicating that they do not care about the collegiate athlete, their words indicated that any roster decisions made were based on what was deemed best for the team and not individual player(s).

When coaching staffs talk about over-signing a class their discussions appear to be very direct and on-point. CA 114, an Assistant Director of Football Operations at a school in the American Athletic Conference, shared what the conversations have been like when his program has discussed over-signing.

The conversations are mostly based on what is the maximum we can sign, and how many can we actually bring in. You might be able to sign 25, but if you only have 19 spots available that is the number we go with. Then as recruiting unfolds, it might get bumped up by 1 or 2 based on academics (if we don’t think a commitment will be eligible we’ll add a signee).

In the case of his institution, they only over-sign a recruiting class if the think a commit will be eligible. Unfortunately, that over-signed player can find themselves without a scholarship or being asked to greyshirt if an offer is not available due to that player becoming eligible. If the over-signed player is aware of this situation because the coaching staff has had honest conversations with him than most coaches believe that is fine. Sadly, there have been several instances where a player wasn’t informed that they were the contingency plan and now they are left with few options (Machen, 2011; Towers, 2011).
A possible reason for over-signing is the need to win immediately. Since the coaching profession has a high turnover rate (Huguenin, 2011) coaches might feel pressured to over-sign. When discussing why certain coaching staffs’ choose to over-sign CA 102, a position coach and personnel professional at a mid-major program, talked about job security.

...sometimes over-signing is done out of desperation. The mindset is that we have to win this year so even though it might not look great if we over-sign we have to because we need to get as many impact guys as we can get. This isn’t great for the student-athletes but it’s a reality of the industry.

CA 102 believes that over-signing is just another way in which coaches are dishonest with prospective collegiate athletes during the recruiting process.

I think that over-signing is a symptom of a much larger disease, which is dishonesty in recruiting. It’s really hard to fill out a roster or recruiting class while letting kids know where they stand at all times. Most kids want to hear that they are your most sought after prospect. I think that over-signing tends to occur when you tell a bunch of folks that “we want you, we want you” and then more folks commit than you originally intended.

CA 102’s statements speak to the fact that in recruiting coaches sometimes get caught up in the fact that they need numbers and kids always want affirmation so they tell everyone that they want them and then will deal with the fallout later. Although over-signing is definitely an issue, it should symptom of a much larger disease which is dishonesty in recruiting.

Another example of the emphasis that teams place on winning is the way that they treat recruits. As previously discussed dishonesty in recruiting is a big issue. If coaches really cared about the collegiate athlete they would be focused on helping them improve on the field and earn an education. Unfortunately, a negative byproduct of over-signing is that the athletes impacted
by it never get a chance to pursue that education (at least for free at that institution). It is important to remember that academics play an important role in college choice decision-making (Canala and Dunlap, 1996). CA 103, the Director of High School Relations for an Atlantic Coast Conference program, hates over-signing because it takes a free educational opportunity away from a prospective/current collegiate athlete. He said, “I don’t like over-signing because you’re promising a kid a scholarship and I don’t care how you twist it but somebody is getting jibbed out of a free education. At the end of the day you’re lying to them when you’re recruiting them.”

For prospective players, over-signing can create more opportunities to go to school, or it can leave an incoming prospect without a scholarship. The biggest effect it has on prospects is that occasionally a guy who believed he was committed may be left without an NLI sent to him prior to signing day or may be asked to greyshirt. For current players, over-signing can turn a college experience into an NFL-like experience where a player must perform at a certain level or risk losing his scholarship.

Early Signing Day

Twelve of the participants discussed how a possible early signing day would help to curtail over-signing and improve the recruiting process overall. During all the interviews, coaches indicated the recruiting process is long, tiresome, and overwhelming at times. In order to improve things for the collegiate athlete more than half of the participants offered up interesting suggestions. CA 112, a Recruiting Assistant in the Big Ten, believes that the process begins too early and needs to change. He said, “I do not believe that we should be contacting sophomores and juniors in high school. It starts to complicate the process too soon.”
The views of CA 112 matched up with prior statements made by CA 104, a position coach in the Mid-American Conference, saying that collegiate athletes are too fickle in their decision-making. One way to possibly avoid having an issue with recruits continuously changing their minds regarding their school choice might be to delay when you start the relationship building process with these recruits (i.e. wait until the June before their senior year of high school) (Donohue, 2014).

CA 101, a Recruiting Coordinator in the Big 12, also addressed the topic of fickle recruits and how he believes that there should be an early signing day (preferably in early December). The recruiting process is very hectic and the possibility of allowing recruits to make an early commitment after a summer/early fall official visit sounds best to him.

I think I speak for the majority when I say that there needs to be an early national letter signing period. I think that would be good, whether it’s in August or December. The problem is that if you make it in August than people are going to say that you should be able to bring kids on official visits earlier which people will say expedites the process which I could see causing real issues. Then you’d be hosting kids on official visits 30 weeks out of the year, which is not what you want to do. If there was one on December 1st I do not think that would be a terrible thing because a lot of times these kids commit to schools without ever visiting because that is where they want to go and they should be able to end the process early if they want because it can be over-whelming.

His plan would allow for kids to sign early if they just wanted to be done with the process. For coaches, this plan would work nicely because it would allow them to fill needs in the late summer or early winter. For the players, it protects them against over-signing if they already signed their NLI.
The fact that an early signing period would further help to protect players from over-signing while at the same time help coaches was made by CA 102. He believes that an early signing period would allow coaches to focus on a smaller number of recruits necessary to round out their class once they received initial commitments.

I think that there should be an early signing period. One way to combat over-signing would be to have an early signing period. A lot of kids now try to make the decision before their senior year, so why not let them sign those last two weeks in July. That way they can have the process done. This will also make it so that during the season you won’t be trying to sign 40 guys for 25 spots because maybe you received 18 commitments in July so now you’re only recruiting 15 kids for 7 spots.

If the point of over-signing is for coaches to be able to get their desired numbers, than maybe an early signing period would allow coaches to get their numbers without having to over-sign. As CA 102 said, if a coach can get 18 of his 25 commits early than he can target his remaining needs better rather than wait and hope to sign every player all at once.

Of course one issue that coaches worry about is whether or not their incoming players will be academically eligible. Coaches over-sign now because they fear that a kid they sign in February might not meet the NCAA’s academic standards come August, so would an early signing period in August before a prospect’s senior year or at the beginning of December really change the recruiting actions of coaches that over-sign? Some participants in this study spoke to that. CA 117, a Defensive Coordinator for a PAC-12 program, talked about the importance of finishing high school so prospects could be physically and academically ready for college.

I believe prospects should be allowed to take official visits earlier than the start of their senior year. The recruiting process happens earlier and decisions are made earlier and
faster so they should have the opportunity to take official visits earlier. I don’t agree with early enrollment. Prospects should finish their senior year of high school. The NCAA should require 8 semesters of high school (or the equivalent). Kids are starting college early, often unprepared both physically and mentally. I also do not agree with an early signing period. The February letter of intent does not need to change. It has worked for years & is still the best time for kids to sign. If academics are a priority, prospective student-athletes need to have time to apply to schools and to finish their academic preparation in the classroom before signing a letter of intent.

His words says let them finish school so that they can come in and contribute. He also seems to be of the mindset that the current signing period system is already the best and that’s why no changes should take place. Assisting prospective collegiate athletes and helping them arrive physically and academically ready for college will protect them from being victims of over-signing. This is because athletes that arrive physically ready likely will not be forced off the team due to poor performance and athletes that arrive academically ready will not have to be part of the anticipated attrition group.

CA 104, a position coach in the Mid-American Conference, also stated that he believes that there is a need for an early signing period, but he also expressed concerns about having an early signing period and still ensuring that coaches have an opportunity to get to know their athletes. He said, “It’s so accelerated now that you don’t know these kids like we used to. I don’t know how you could slow it down and still incorporate something like early signing.” Drawing from his prior experiences, CA 104 continuously talks about the recruiting process today and makes statements indicating that the coach-player relationship is not as strong, that recruits are fickle, and that although an early signing period is necessary he does not know how it should be
enacted into the landscape of today’s form of college football. An early signing period would require earlier contact with recruits so that those players could make informed decisions about what school they wanted to attend, but if you believe that the process is too accelerated now than implementing an early signing period would be counterintuitive if your intent is to slow down the recruiting process.

One additional view about academics and prospective collegiate athletes came from CA 106, an Assistant Head Coach at a school in the Mountain West Conference. When our discussion lead to him talking about changes that he would like to see in the college game he spoke about keeping prospects from being able to compete during their freshman year. If academics is a reason for over-signing than maybe a dialogue needs to happen regarding whether or not incoming players are ready to succeed on the field and in the classroom at the same time. He said, “I do believe in an old-school philosophy that all freshmen should not be eligible for competition. They should have academic experience before athletic experience. Too often, we lose the player before he ever gets a chance to play. Once is too often…..”

Although coaches exist in a results based profession, collegiate athletes should not be put in a position where they are being forced into action too early. It might be in their best interest to provide them with an opportunity to learn how to balance the life of being a student and an athlete. The goal of coaches and administrators should be to help their athletes grow intellectually through stressing the importance of schoolwork and athletically through proper coaching and training.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

While analyzing the participants’ responses, both in terms of looking at their answers and the emergent themes of those responses, three areas of discussion surfaced that must be addressed. Those areas include that the fact that: 1) over-signing in college football might be a necessary evil; 2) the demands placed on coaches to win now might lead to win-at-all-costs philosophies; and 3) that no preventative measures or punishments are in place to curtail the act of over-signing.

Over-Signing as a Necessary Evil

The recruiting process is typically viewed as a time when coaches attempt to add as many talented athletes to their roster as possible. Generally, the average fan looks at who is coming in and considers how they will replace the departed seniors, but that is where the fan needs to expand the scope of how they view recruiting. Attrition commonly occurs on a football team through ways other than graduation. Other common forms of attrition can occur if a coach loses players early to the NFL draft, if players decide to transfer, a player loses eligibility due to academic issues (ex: poor grades or suspension due to cheating), or if a player has to walk away from football because they have suffered a career ending injury. Though career ending injuries do happen, the participants in this study focused more on player transfers and academic issues as a reason to over-sign.

Academics should play an important role in the lives of all collegiate athletes, but like the general student body many collegiate athletes do not take their grades as seriously as they should. Academics play a vital role within intercollegiate athletics and one barometer that the NCAA uses to evaluate the academic success of a program is looking at its graduation success
rate (GSR). For the incoming class of 2005, the SEC (69%), the Pac-12 (68%), and the Big 12 (66%) conferences experienced graduation rates less than 70% for those players by 2010 (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2014). If teams can sign a maximum of 25 new recruits to an NLI per year that means that – within those conferences – on average only 70 percent of those 25 players (17.5 players) were graduating within five years. That means that at least 7 players per team did not graduate. Statistics such as that are proof that there is an issue within college football of having to deal with players that are underperforming in the classroom which might require a coach to over-sign. In many of those types of cases, the general public is unaware that a player is struggling academically so they might not know that reason for over-signing was to account for a future academically ineligible player that the coaching staff knew about. Although, it should be noted that not all of the players in that remaining 30 percent struggle with academic issues. Sometimes a player may leave college early to enter the NFL draft or transfer to another institution to get the playing time and/or the education that they desire.

Whether it is because they feel they should be playing more, they think a different scheme suits their talents more, or they are about to graduate and can still use their remaining eligibility elsewhere, players are transferring out of programs now more than they have in the last decade (Personal correspondence with CA 101, January 20, 2014). Obviously, many college football players attend school because the want to earn an education while playing football. If a player feels that they can earn a comparable education elsewhere while actually getting to play than they likely will decide to transfer. A decision to transfer might be more prevalent at positions where there is only one starter. For example, more than 20 quarterbacks have already transferred out of or into a BCS-conference program since the end of the 2014 college football season.
season, and there will presumably be another round after depth charts come into focus in upcoming spring practices (Mandel, 2014). In addition to transferring for playing time purposes, sometimes a player will transfer to a program that runs a scheme more suited to their style of play. One example of this could be looking at the quarterbacks that were on the programs that Rich Rodriguez inherited at Michigan and Arizona. When he arrived at Michigan, heralded recruit Ryan Mallet transferred out because he did not fit the spread option scheme utilized by Coach Rodriguez (Ann Arbor.com Staff, 2011). Similarly, when Coach Rodriguez became the head coach at Arizona heralded transfer Tom Savage transferred again (Adelson, 2012). Lastly, the NCAA allows for players that graduate but still have athletic eligibility to transfer to another school and be immediately eligible to participate (as long as the graduate program they enroll in was not offered at their previous institution). Since all of the above mentioned cases are challenges facing coaches, they might decide to over-sign to account for players leaving.

Over-signing as a necessary evil was also mentioned when talking about how often recruits tend to have change of hearts. The media spends all its time chastising these coaches when they pull scholarships from players and/or over-sign, but they fail to realize that often these recruits are just as guilty of the same deceit. Although these recruits are young adults, they still could arguably be more beholden to their verbal commitments than the sometimes act. Coaches do not dislike recruits that take visits and continue to remain non-committal to any school because they have not pledged to sign with them yet. However, if a player commits to a program but then continues to take visits that can be alarming to a coach. If a player is uncertain, than he shouldn’t be committing is a mindset that many coaches shared. The reality that many coaches face is that they cannot always rely on a prospect’s word. It’s because this lack of trust exists
between coaches and players that actions like over-signing are done by coaches to help protect themselves from being the hurt party.

Finally, any discussion on over-signing as a necessary evil must take into account that a school of thought exists that if you’re managing your team correctly you will not be forced to over-sign. The issues mentioned previously (academic issues, player transfers, and fickle recruits) are all manageable – potentially avoidable – challenges if you are doing everything right. A coach can avoid having a problem with players that are struggling academically if he recruits players that see academics as a priority in their lives. Also, a coach can possibly avoid having to deal with player transfers if he recruits players that fit the schemes the team intends to use as well as engages in honest dialogue with recruits during the recruitment process (ex. Do not tell players that they will start immediately if you plan to redshirt them and do not intend for them to crack the two-deep depth chart until their redshirt sophomore season). Furthermore, a coach might avoid having to deal with indecisive recruits if they really focus on building relationships with those recruits while at the same time assuring them that they should not rush into a commitment decision. Over-signing might be seen as a necessary evil by most coaches because they are not running their programs the right way, so it might help to change the way they do things.

Fans and those in the media should care or take into account all the factors outside of a coaches’ control when discussing over-signing. Where many journalists have chastised teams for over-signing and claiming that they are hurting players, which has happened, the results of this study indicate that a variety of other factors exist which might influence a coach to over-sign. Over-signing during recruiting is used by coaches to bring in talented players, but it is also used by coaches to replace departing transfer students, ineligible students, and students that are
quitting due to injury. Those reasons are not terrible reasons to engage in the practice, so it is important to focus on the reasons behind over-signing when deciding whether or not to chastise teams that over-sign.

Coaches and a Demanding Fan Base

College football is a multi-million dollar business. The fact that football can generate a lot of money and publicity for schools is great for coaches because it helps to make their sport a priority in the eyes of administrators, but it is also a negative because of the intense pressure that is put on them to win and win now (Zenor, 2013). The coaching profession can be very lucrative in terms of financial compensation and national fame, but it is also constantly experiencing turnover. Since the 2000 season, there have been 238 coaching changes – meaning an average of almost two per school among the now 128 FBS programs. There were 103 changes made from 2000-05 – and 83 of those coaches (80.6%) already had been fired or left on their own by 2011.

Huguenin (2011) wrote that using even more recent history as a mathematical guide, about two-thirds of the 26 coaches hired during the 2011 offseason would be gone by the time the 2016 season rolls around. Constant coaching turnover in the college game can lead to coaches entering into win-at-all-costs philosophies. If a modern day coach assesses the current coaching landscape they would see that winning is very important because it can either lead to continued employment or a move up to a higher paying job (many come available every year). When looking at Gene Chizik’s time at Auburn we learn that a coach must win consistently; Chizik was fired just two years after winning a national time. Coaches need to win consistently every year and over-signing is one action that a coach can take to possibly increase his chances of winning.
Since coaches face intense pressure to win, and win consistently, over-signing might be utilized to help them accomplish that because it provides them with opportunities to bring in new talent that might fit into their scheme better (important if it’s new coaching staff) and it also can serve as a way to “have more cards in the deck” (Personal correspondence with CA 101, January 20, 2014). When a coach inherits a new job it’s either because the previous coach left or was fired. If the coach left it traditionally is because they were successful and have since used that success to secure a higher paying job. If that is the case a coach inherits then the pressure to win is intense because the previous regime instilled that culture, so losing would not be received well by a fan base that knows that its program is capable of winning. If the coach was fired, the new guy should – you would think – have some time to recruit his own players and install his own schemes, but administrators do not appear to be offering new coaches time which leads to coaches having to develop win-at-all-costs mindsets (Huguenin, 2011).

For coaches entering a situation where a winning culture exists, over-signing can be used as a tool to help you acquire as many talented players as possible so that you can put the best group of starters together. For coaches entering a situation where a losing culture exists, over-signing can be used to help you bring in a maximum amount of new players that have not been inundated with that losing culture that you can also build around. In either case, new coaches traditionally have new schemes (unless the new hire is a promoted assistant from the previous staff) which might require different skill sets at different positions; over-signing allows coaches to overhaul their rosters and bring in players that fit what they want in a player at different positions. Essentially, coaching college football is a demanding profession and coaches can use a practice like over-signing, in positive ways, to give their program a variety of roster management options.
One way a coach can be successful, is to recruit more talent than his opponents. Over-signing can be used a way to ensure that your opponents are not bringing in the talent that they need to compete. Over-signing can afford a coach the opportunity to keep bringing talent while simultaneously keeping talent away from other competitors. Coaching is a profession that involves ego, which can translate into coaches trying to win recruits at the expense of the competition. If a coach decides to over-sign to keep a player from going to a competitor, he is intentionally trying to put that other team at a competitive disadvantage. Although some might view that as wrong, because the coach might not have legitimate interest in that player, it could be argued that if that player were to sign with him that the competing staff did a poor job of showing the player that he was not desired by the other staff for the right reasons. Coaches engage in negative recruiting, a process where the build up their program by discussing the negatives of other programs, so it is conceivable that the competing staff could reach out to that player and educate them on what is happening. If they competitor loses that player, the winning coach feels a sense of pride for securing that player and accomplishment for keep him away from the other team.

Fans and those in the media should care or take into account coaching transitions and the pressure that coaches are put under when discussing over-signing. When a new coach enters a program he is likely to bring in players that fit his schemes and try to get rid of those that do not. Is that any different than a business that undergoes a change in management? Coaches are managers of multimillion dollar football programs that have fans and administrators that have high expectations for them. Over-signing can be used to overhaul a roster with players that fit the direction that the new team is heading towards. Players on the current roster that lose their spot and compelled to transfer or serve as walk-ons, which is not always ideal for those players,
but if you have an athletic scholarship to a FBS school than you probably will not lack transfer options. It must be remembered that coaching turnover occurs in college football, almost as much as roster turnover, should be considered when discussing whether or not a coach is just in his decision to over-sign his roster.

Lack of Preventative/Punitive Measures

During the interview process, CA 102 was asked if he believed that over-signing should be prevented, and if yes does the NCAA do enough to prevent over-signing. His response to the question followed how many in the media view the process and is worth discussion. He stated:

Okay, I guess I will try to say this as politically as I can. I do not think that we should have rules if we are not planning to enforce them. If the rule is going to be that you can only sign up to 25 in a class than let’s enforce it. If we’re not going to enforce it – and it sure seems like we do not – then let’s not have the rule…Over-signing is a rule that people know about and can see if you commit, but there does not seem to be any punishment handed out to those coaches. You know what I mean? Which is really silly to me…I don’t understand that.

Regardless of whether a coach or administrator is in favor of over-signing or not, an issue exists because the practice of over-signing is illegal according to the NCAA but there is no punishment handed out to coaches that commit the act. The fact that punishment does not exist is even more puzzling when you consider that over-signing is a publically observable act.

CA 102’s views align with the available literature on over-sight in regards to over-signing in college football. Unfortunately, in regards to oversight help from collegiate governing bodies, athletes are receiving no help from the NCAA or the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA). Fondren (2010) wrote after her personal communication with an NCAA
representative that the NCAA is more concerned with what coaches “do” (e.g., economic compensation, contact violations, recruiting violations) rather than what coaches “say” to prospects. The AFCA is also not very active in trying to curtail the actions of coaches from misleading recruits. The AFCA can suspend a member coach from its organization for knowingly lying to or misleading prospective collegiate athletes, although it has not happened in the last sixteen years (Barnhart, 2003). Coaches can tell a recruit that they are on scholarship and then pull it when they have too many qualifiers or when they want to replace a current player with an incoming prospect without penalty for the NCAA or AFCA.

The NCAA does have the power to help further prevent over-signing. Two ways they could impact that practice would be to change the signing date and establish an early signing day. The current recruiting calendar is set up where kids are being asked to commit to schools in February (soonest they can sign a NLI) and then those schools need to hope they pass the entrance requirements. If schools had more time to wait on those kids to qualify they would not have to sign their back-up plan player as well. Several participants mentioned the current recruiting calendar as an issue.

The fact that no punishment policies exist to curtail the negative reasons for over-signing should be considered alarming to fans and those in the media. The NCAA’s main focus should be protecting collegiate athletes, but in the case of over-signing they have routinely failed. Additionally, the AFCA should be more involved in making sure that its members engage in proper recruiting tactics, or at least tactics that would be considered appropriate considering the roster that coach is molding. There are positive reasons for over-signing, but over-sight needs to exists to curtail the possible negative outcomes from occurring.
One way in which the NCAA might help protect prospective collegiate athletes, while simultaneously helping coaches, would be to establish an early signing period. If kids can sign in the summer then it avoids coaches having to recruit more players than necessary because of the fear of prospects flipping their commitments. Academics might not be as big of an issue either because then the schools could work with the kids throughout their senior year to help and make sure they are eligible. Although it can be argued that coaches are not responsible to helping to make sure that a prospect is eligible, that task can become an assumed responsibility if coaches are able to start signing players sooner. It would be in the best interest of a coach to make sure throughout the year that a prospect they sign in September is in good academic standing throughout his senior year. Coaches could help incoming players enroll in online classes if they needed to boost their GPA or reach the number of credits they needed. The process of helping recruits take online classes is already occurring in college football (Feldman, 2007). One thing for sure though is that prospects might be much safer if they could sign a NLI in the summer and know for sure that they will be going to that program. Similarly, current players that might be on the roster bubble will be in a strong situation to see what players are coming to determine whether or not they might lose their scholarship.

Schools with high academic standards might not like an early signing period, so a dialogue needs to take place to make sure that those schools are not being put at a disadvantage. Furthermore, whether or not an early signing period would help to fix the issue of prospect eligibility is also a conversation that must occur. Presently, coaches have a fear that prospects that they sign in February might not be eligible in August, so then it is completely sensible to believe that they might have those same fears – potentially to a more heightened extent – if they have to start signing prospects in July or August before their senior years. Additionally, an early
signing period might put unnecessary stress on prospective collegiate athletes by requiring them to make commitment decisions when they are not ready. If a high school senior struggles with making such an important choice, then we can potentially expect a high school junior to struggle even more. Although over-signing can be prevented somewhat by an early signing period, having such a signing date will not completely eliminate eligibility concerns for at-risk prospects and it will not remove indecisive recruits from the recruiting process.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

This study on over-signing adds significant information to an often discussed, but rarely researched, aspect of college football recruiting. In addition to providing rare, first-hand accounts from currently employed college football coaches and professional staff, participants from a variety of conferences were involved in the research, adding a diversity of perspectives into how coaches recruit, the pressures that coaches face, and idea for how the current recruiting system might be improved. The participants’ responses provide a unique insight into the troublesome experience of trying to recruit prospective collegiate athletes that might waver in their commitments or have academic issues while at the same time executing proper roster management. Among the significant findings of this study are several new developments not discussed by the general media when discussing over-signing, including continued references to the general attrition experienced by college football teams, the indecisiveness of recruits, a discussion of how football is a sport that demands instant success from its coaches, and the realization that enforcement against over-signing does not exist.

Primary amongst the findings is new information into the motivational reasons behind over-signing in college football recruiting that extends beyond hoping to achieve a competitive advantage. The results of this study indicate that coaches over-sign to keep from being competitive disadvantaged, account for the indecisiveness of the modern recruit, combat the general attrition that college football rosters experience, and remain gainfully employed. As previous literature suggests, there is potential to gain a competitive edge by using over-signing (Bachman, 2011; Felder, 2012; Gordon, 2011). However, the interviews that I’ve conducted provide other reasons to believe that coaches’ over-sign and many of them might be considered
justifiable in light of today’s college football landscape. While many coaches did discuss the fact that over-signing can help coaches win by providing them with as many athletes as possible, there seemed to be a greater focus on reasons that extended beyond just winning that only a few in the media have discussed, and rarely in connection to over-signing in college football recruiting (Adelson, 2012, AnnArbor.com Staff, 2011; Doyle, 2010; Huguenin, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Mandel, 2014; Zenor, 2013).

In his 2012 article, Felder contends that power conferences like the SEC are not elite solely because they over-sign but instead that the leagues are solid because of the dedication of their coaches and the talent pool from which they draw from (Felder, 2012, ¶6). While my study acknowledges that some areas of the country have stronger prospect talent pools, the tendency of schools in the SEC to over-sign was frequently discussed during interviews with participants and is routinely mentioned in the media (Bachman, 2011; Felder, 2012; Gordon, 2011). At no point during any of the interviews did a participant say that a reason for over-signing would be because you are recruiting a talented area.

This study recognizes that a relationship exists between over-signing and the idea of gaining a competitive advantage. This is evidenced not only through the findings in this study, but also in previous research into coaching motivations behind over-signing which found that coaches face intense pressures to immediately win and that over-signing can be seen as a way to bring in an optimal amount of athletes from which to choose a group of players that they believe can do accomplish that task (Doyle, 2010; Johnson, 2011; Zenor, 2013). While attempts have been made to prevent the use of over-signing to gain a competitive advantage there does not appear to be a stoppage in the use of over-signing by the nation’s elite programs (Slice of Life, 2014).
The opinions of the participants in this study, along with Bachman (2011) and Gordon (2011) support the idea that over-signing can be used to gain a competitive advantage. It is important to note, that the participants in this study found using over-signing to gain a competitive advantage acceptable if it was being done the right way. The results of this study indicate that coaches’ support over-signing as long as it is done for the right reasons and that the players involved are continually informed about where they stand with the team that is recruiting them.

As suggested in previous articles (Adelson, 2012, AnnArbor.com Staff, 2011; Doyle, 2010; Huguenin, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Mandel, 2014; Zenor, 2013) there are many different reasons why a coach might over-sign other than plain greed. Additionally, the pressures faced by coaches to win immediately also puts them in positions where they feel that they must do whatever options are available in order to keep their jobs. Using over-signing as a competitive edge tool is a possible, but it also might have nothing to do with gaining a competitive advantage.

Every participant in this study provided more than one reason why a coach might over-sign a recruiting/roster. Academic ineligibility, indecisive recruits, player transfer, players facing legal/academic issues of misconduct, player disposition, and other reasons were given in addition to seeking a competitive advantage. As CA 103 said, “If you over-sign, than you obviously know something about your team that the general public does not know.” While over-signing has been used in the past in ways in which it hurt players, it is not a certainty that all over-signing is evil and that every team that over-signs is hurting players. Depending on the conversations taking place between the coaches and athletes, as well as the reasons for over-signing, it can be an effective roster management practice. It is for that reason that fans and
those in the media – traditionally a population that views over-signing negatively – should change their views about over-signing and view it as a process that coaches can use to effectively make sure that they have 85 players on scholarship that they believe can win and represent their school well.

Implications

After analyzing participant responses, it is evident that certain reasons for over-signing, such as gaining a competitive advantage through the intentional deception of recruits, are not acceptable within the coaching and administrator community. The idea of over-signing to ensure that a coach is able to have 85 counters in the fall was supported by participants consistently saying that coaches are always trying to “get their numbers”, and several coaches articulated a fear that if they did not over-sign than they would potentially be able to guarantee that they were bringing in the amount of players that they wanted to play the positions that they needed to have filled. Likewise, many coaches demonstrated a desire to distance themselves from the practice of over-signing by saying that they did not over-sign. In the case of some of those coaches, they have actually been part of staffs that had brought in more than 25 counters but they did so with a plan of how to handle each of those athletes which made over-signing an acceptable practice at that point.

The findings of this study also revealed that, in addition to over-signing to gain a competitive advantage, teams over-sign in an attempt to not be at a competitive disadvantage, deal with indecisive recruits, combat general attrition, and remain employed. This is evidenced through the experience of coaches that worked at schools that have done both (Gordon, 2011) and the continued use of the word attrition. Additionally, as several participants said, and the literature reflects (Huguenin, 2011), that coaches will assess their job security and decide to
over-sign is a given year because they have no guarantees of being retained the following year. In the minds of this study’s participants, if you need to over-sign in order to keep your job, not be at a disadvantage to your competitors, or ensure that you bring in the numbers that you need than over-signing is now an acceptable action to take.

Among the stories, there are also examples that demonstrate a collective mindset of fearing the indecisiveness of a prospective collegiate athlete and their family complications that recently been discussed on social media sites and different recruiting/college football websites (McLaughlin, 2013). Even if a coaching staff wants to have integrity and not over-sign their recruiting class/roster they might have to do so just because they need to account for the fact that high school seniors and junior college players have fickle hearts/minds that seemingly can change at any moment. The responses of participants in this study also highlighted the effect that greyshirting has on the over-signing practice. A few of the participants discussed how they purposely recruit a player as a greyshirt – and he knows it – with the idea that they will offer him a scholarship either in the spring on his first year on campus or in the fall to begin his second year. Additionally, if a team has counters that they can still offer from the previous class (ex: they signed 21 in the previous class so they have 4 offers remaining) they can offer players in the upcoming class those scholarships as long as they become an early enrollee meaning they enter college during what would have been there last semester of high school.

While there was abundant evidence of general acceptance for over-signing in college football, the participants still expressed a disdain for recruiting practices that involve a coach deliberately deceiving and show poor roster management policies on behalf of the coach (Doyle, 2010; Machen, 2011; Towers, 2011). Several participants stated that their colleagues generally accepted over-signing as a recruiting practice as long as the athletes were informed of where they
stood, in terms of receiving a scholarship, and as long as the reasons for over-signing were justifiable. Often, justifiable reasons for over-signing included general attrition of the current roster or fear of academic eligibility of incoming players. In the case of over-signing due to general attrition, the coach must be certain that a player is transferring, will be academically ineligible, or is planning to quit football before making the decision to over-sign. In regards to eligibility of incoming players, a coach must make sure that the player they decide to target in the event they cannot get the preferred player knows that his scholarship is conditional on the other player not meeting academic standards.

This study is evidence that there is a need for institutional and/or administrative oversight regarding college football recruiting to make sure that the actions taken by coaches are justifiable and not going to negatively impact current or potential collegiate athletes. As coaching salaries rise and a desire for producing consistently winning teams increases a greater focus needs to be placed on looking at the individuals tasked with meeting those expectations to make sure that they do so in an acceptable way. The experiences and opinions of the participants featured in this study illustrate the competitive nature of college football and college football recruiting, and institutional and/or administrative support would have a positive impact on helping individuals in this competitive industry make appropriate decisions.

In conclusion, the results of this study can directly impact and inform athletes, coaches, and the NCAA. Athletes now know that college football is a business and if they do not perform that their coaches have ways to replace them. Additionally, athletes know that their coaches are constantly at work to make sure that they can assemble the best group of 85 players that they can. If an athlete chooses to give their staff reasons to lose faith in them (i.e. poor grades, off the field issues, poor performance, malcontent, etc.) they can expect to possibly be released because
their program can over-sign and replace them. Coaches now know that they do not have to be afraid about over-signing within their peer group because the practice is acceptable as long as the reasons behind it our pure. Some form of coaching education should take place to ensure that coaches are not abusing the over-signing process and subsequently hurting collegiate athletes. Lastly, the NCAA can learn from this study that their rule to prevent over-signing is not working and even if it were that the reasons for the practice are sometimes justified. The NCAA needs to re-evaluate its bylaws on over-signing to make sure that they are allowing coaches to assemble competitive rosters while also protecting current and prospective collegiate athletes.

Reflexivity

This research has greatly expanded my view of the college football recruiting process and all of the internal decisions that have to be made coaches when recruiting. They have to determine how to assemble the best group of 85 players they can while making sure that have acquired talent, depth, character, and independent individuals. I realized very early into my reflexive self-interview, that I really didn’t understand as much as I thought I did. I have following college football recruiting since my time as a freshman in college and have arrogantly assumed that I knew everything that went into the recruiting process because of the various articles that I have read on the topic. In retrospect, I have learned a lot about the recruiting process and all of the considerations that go into assembling a roster.

As qualitative research is a reflexive process, I continuously tried to remind myself to not be bias when conducting my interviews or coding. During my graduate qualitative interpretations class I learned that researcher bias could even extend to how I worded and asked different questions. Originally, the idea for this research came from another graduate class I took on sport and higher education. I presented this topic as a research proposal idea (basically I
framed it as a hypothetical study that I could do) and before conducting my interviews I went back to my PowerPoint from that class and read what my views on the topic were at that time. I realized that my opinion regarding over-signing was that it was a trouble recruiting practice used by the elite programs to get ahead. I strived to not frame my questions or ask follow-up questions during interviews that represented that view.

Limitations

The participants featured in this study represent a diversity of coaches and administrators from conferences all across the nation. Unfortunately, for this study, none of the participants were from the SEC which is the most discussed conference when addressing the issue of over-signing in college football. Coaches and administrators from the SEC were emailed and asked to participate in this study, but none responded to participate. A few responded to the recruitment letter by asking to be removed from future email list. Although none of the participants were from the SEC, I feel that the results of this research are still generalizable to teams in the SEC because many of the participants have worked in the SEC previously. Coaches and administrators tend to move around a lot in college football which allowed for many coaches to talk about their variety of experiences.

Another limit to this study is that some of the coaches decided to participate in this study through a completed email submission of the interview guide. Participants were all initially contacted via email and asked to participate. If they chose to participate, a copy of the consent document as well as the interview guide was emailed to them. Some of the participants read through the interview guide and sent it back completed with their answers. They did this because they wanted to be part of the study but were committed time wise to college football recruiting (national signing day was approaching) and spring football. Although the participants
did not submit their answers during an interview process it is my belief that their emailed interview guide submission represented their views on over-signing. All participants responded to follow-up emails for clarity on answers.

Final Remarks

The participants featured in this study represent a diverse group of individuals in terms of their job titles. Additionally, these participants represent a majority of the FBS conferences. Each of the participants spoke openly and sometimes jokingly about the recruiting process and what factors they believe contribute to over-signing. While it is possible that many of the participants could have chosen to speak against over-signing for the sake of being correct under NCAA rules, they overwhelming championed the practice as long as it was being done appropriately. Overall, the practice of over-signing was seen as an acceptable practice that coaches use to account for general attrition and indecisive recruits.

It is imperative that future research examine the support given by administrators to coaches during the recruiting process. If coaches feel supported then they might not use over-signing in a negative way to overhaul a roster and displace current or other potential collegiate athletes. Additionally, someone with access to SEC coaches and professional staff could replicate this study to see if individuals currently working in that conference use over-signing for the same reasons found in this study. Furthermore, the coaches and professional college football staff interviewed for this study represent only a small portion of their overall group. While the majority of participants felt comfortable talking about over-signing, it is important to remember that it is not a practice that the NCAA allows (accept past 28 offers) so some of the possible participants might not have felt comfortable discussing the topic. Perhaps a researcher with more FBS football contacts might be able get more respondents.
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APPENDIX A

Coaches Code:

Date: ___________________

College Football Over-Signing Interview Guide

1) How long have you been involved in the recruiting/coaching of college football?

2) How long have you been a Recruiting Coordinator?

3) What is the largest recruiting class you’ve ever been part of?

4) How do you view the recruiting process?

5) What is your opinion regarding the practice of over-signing in college football?

6) Is over-signing a discussed topic amongst the coaching staffs you’ve been part of? If yes, can you describe these conversations?

7) From your experience, what seems to be the consensus view of coaches towards the practice of over-signing?

8) Why do you believe that certain coaching staffs over-sign?

9) Why do you believe that certain coaching staffs do not over-sign?

10) What impact do you believe over-signing has on players (address both current and prospective)?

11) If your program has ever over-signed, what factors were considered in determining what players to not extend scholarships to? (i.e. player disposition, academic standing, positional depth, etc.)

12) Do you have any examples – personal or that you’ve read – involving athletes being harmed by over-signing?

13) Do you believe over-signing should be prevented? If yes, do you believe that the NCAA does enough to prevent over-signing?

14) Do you believe that the recruiting process should be changed? If so, how?
Consent Form for study pertaining to
Coaching Motivations Behind Over-Signing In College Football

Introduction: My name is Robert Turick and I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) currently pursuing my M.Ed. in Sport Administration. My advisor, Dr. Amanda Koba, at BGSU is an Assistant Professor in Sport Administration within the School of Human Movement, Sport and Leisure Studies. You are being asked to be part of this study because of your experience as a college football recruiting coordinator at the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) level. Your contact information was found by searching your athletic department’s website.

Purpose: This study is important because the results could benefit the lives of student-athletes that have been affected by over-signing as well as provide possible solutions to help improve the current recruiting system for coaches. The research results are intended to benefit student-athletes and college football coaches. The participating coaches in this study gain the benefit of trying to help improve the lives of their players.

Procedure: In order to answer the primary research questions of this study, I intend to interview recruiting coordinators at BCS schools to gain their insight into over-signing in college football. During this interview I will ask you 14 open-ended questions about your opinions of over-signing. Choosing to be interviewed for this study should take up no more than 25-40 minutes of your time, though it could potentially be longer or shorter depending on the length of the answers you provide. If you choose to participate in this study a copy of the consent form and the interview questions will be sent to you prior to your interview date. The interview will be recorded. At the begining of the interview you will be given a chance to ask me any questions that you might have about the study and then, if you choose to participate, you will be asked to verbally consent to being part of the study (your verbal consent will be recorded as a part of the interview). Your involvement in the study is complete once you have completed your interview with me.

Voluntary nature: Your participation is completely voluntary. Additionally, you must be at least 18 years old to take part in this study. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University.

Confidentiality: The data from this study will be stored on a password protected laptop. The only people that will have access to the files are Dr. Koba and I. All potential participants have already been coded in an excel spreadsheet and given a number. Only Dr. Panie-Koba and I will know the names behind the number. All files will be stored for a period of three years and then destroyed.

Risks: Data will be collected through phone interviews. Participants will be exposed to no greater of a risk than they might typically face in their daily lives.
Contact information:
If you have any question about the research or your participation in the research feel free to contact myself or Dr. Koba:

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<tr>
<th>Primary Investigator</th>
<th>Faculty Advisor</th>
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<tr>
<td>Robert Turick</td>
<td>Dr. Amanda Koba</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:rturick@bgsu.edu">rturick@bgsu.edu</a></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(814) 835-2732</td>
<td>(419) 372-7229</td>
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</tbody>
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You may also contact Bowling Green State University’s Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hrsb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

At the beginning of your interview you will be asked to confirm that you have read this document, you will have an opportunity to ask me questions, and then you will be asked to verbally give your informed consent to participate in this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration to be part of this project.
APPENDIX C

Robert Turick
Bowling Green State University
Graduate Student in Sport Administration

12 January 2014

Dear professional working in college football,

My name is Robert Turick and I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University working towards getting a masters degree in sport administration. I am currently working on conducting my thesis. My research topic deals with coaching motivations behind over-signing in college football. I am an avid college football fan and have an interest in learning more about college football recruiting.

The objective of my study is to determine why college coaches over-sign. There are many reasons that people in the media give for why coaching staffs might over-sign, but I’m interested in talking with professionals that currently make those decisions to determine what the actual reasons might be.

Your responses are very important to me in examining the motivational factors or influential circumstances that lead to over-signing. Agreeing to be interviewed over the phone for this study would be greatly appreciated. The interview should only take between 25-40 minutes. If you agreed to take part in this study, a copy of the questions you will be asked (14 questions total) during the interview as well as the consent form document will be emailed to you prior to the study.

Please email me back to let me know if you would be open to being interviewed for this study. If you decide to take part in this study I will email you to set up an interview date and time.

Thank you for your time and consideration to be part of this study.

Sincerely,
Robert Turick
APPENDIX D

DATE: November 10, 2013
TO: Robert Turlick
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [528474-2] Coaching Motivations Behind Over-Signing in College Football
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: November 18, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: November 3, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 75 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on November 3, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.