A BASIC INTERPRETIVE EXPLORATION OF THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS
FOR PROSPECTIVE DIVISION III STUDENT ATHLETES

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A BASIC INTERPRETIVE EXPLORATION OF THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS FOR
PROSPECTIVE DIVISION III STUDENT ATHLETES (182 pp.)

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The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to explore the recruitment and

enrollment process for Division III athletic recruits. Rather than reflecting on these experiences

after going through it, this study provided access into the experience as they were still going

through the process as seniors in high school. Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of College

Choice was used as the conceptual framework for this study.

Data were collected from prospective Division III student-athletes as they were engaged

in their college search during their senior year of high school through individual interviews and a

follow-up focus group conversation. The research led to four key findings: the students sought

authentic interactions with the colleges that were recruiting them, the students received guidance

and feedback from current coaches in their lives, academic offerings provided a foundation to the

student college search, and parents were influential participants in each student's college search.

If athletic and enrollment administrators can understand the process as a student

experiences it while they are being recruited, they will have a more thorough understanding of

how to connect the needs of each student with what the institution has to offer. With a better

understanding of the process, recruiters can be more genuine with the information they provide

and, hopefully, enroll students who are a good fit for the institution athletically and

academically.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When people think about college athletics, their thoughts often gravitate toward 90,000 fans packed into a stadium on a Saturday afternoon, or underdogs hoping to bust fans' brackets in a basketball tournament in March. The athletic landscape at the collegiate level, however, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in particular, is much larger than the narrow focus of the major Division I programs often highlighted by the media. The NCAA is an organization that is run by member institutions to help provide opportunities for student-athletes to continue their educations (What is the NCAA, 2018). Additionally, within the NCAA, there are over 1,100 institutions that participate across three divisions and 100 athletic conferences (What is the NCAA, 2018). The three divisions were established to combine schools with similar philosophies and competitive elements and are governed individually by presidents/chancellors of schools within the division (NCAA, 2021). The NCAA employs staff members who work for the national association, but representatives from the institutions who are members of the association ultimately decide on initiatives and policies (What is the NCAA, 2018).

Colleges and universities are experiencing increased challenges in recruitment of incoming students. One issue related to these challenges is shifting demographics and an overall decline in high school graduates over the next decade throughout many regions of the United States (Western Interstate Commission, 2020). Across the United States, the number of public and private high school graduates will decrease by over 140,000 between 2020 and 2030 (Western Interstate Commission, 2020). This trend will have an even greater effect on the Midwest region, as it will experience a seven percent decline in high school graduates during this

same period (Western Interstate Commission, 2020). A declining population, with continued declines projected, has resulted in a shift that has led to greater competition among institutions to fill their classes and meet their enrollment goals.

As these shifts occur in conjunction with continued popularity of collegiate athletics, an opportunity exists for enrollment professionals to develop strategic efforts surrounding prospective student-athletes. Many enrollment professionals have already explored or developed recruitment plans specifically targeting prospective student-athletes (NCAA, 2018). Division III institutions are especially focused on the recruitment and enrollment of student-athletes since an average of 20–30% of these institutions are comprised of student-athletes (NCAA, 2018). Without a strong incoming class of student-athletes, many of these institutions would struggle to meet their overall enrollment goals.

Not all races and ethnicities will experience the same shifts in their populations throughout the next decade. During this period, the White, African American, and American Indian/Alaska Native populations will see a decline in their overall high school graduates, whereas Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders will see an increase in the number of high school graduates by 2030 (Western Interstate Commission, 2020). As demographics shift and students from diverse backgrounds are more prevalent within higher education (Western Interstate Commission, 2020), college choice research has continued to focus on college search needs for students from different backgrounds. Students who come from a diverse background have different resources, needs, thoughts, and experiences as they go through their college searches (Bell et al., 2009; Braddock & Hua, 2006; Cox, 2016; Perna, 2000; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Teranishia et al., 2004).

Colleges and universities are institutions that are designed to educate students, but they are also businesses that require students in order to continue operating. Admission officers, along with other employees across campuses, including athletic coaches, are tasked with the responsibility of bringing in a new class of students each year. From an admissions standpoint, three types of institutions exist: open door colleges that admit anyone to the school, selective colleges that make decisions based upon abilities and field of study, and competitive colleges that deny qualified students on the grounds of issues with space (Goren, 1962). Carnegie Classifications identify these three categories of institutions as inclusive, selective, and more selective (2018). This discrepancy in selectivity still exists; according to the *NACAC State of College Admission Report* (Clinedinst, 2019), acceptance rates range from less than 10% to greater than 90%. The importance of enrollment can be demonstrated within the growth of admissions and enrollment offices over the past several decades. The average admission office in the early 1960s had only a few people who were responsible for admissions work, whereas 25 years later these offices had developed into larger operations with a dozen or more staff members (Hodum & James, 2010).

This increased complexity of structure and focus on enrollment may be a result of the increasing competition among universities to recruit and enroll an adequate number of students (McDonough, 1994). A competitive environment within higher education admissions began to develop throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s (Paulsen, 1990). As competition increased among institutions, students began to take on a consumer mentality and colleges and universities had to develop strategies to position themselves against competitor institutions (Paulsen, 1990). If students are acting like consumers, as indicated by Paulsen (1990), throughout their college

selection process, every institution must consider their choice factors in order to best promote their school to entice each prospective student to choose their institution.

Definition of Key Terms

The following section identifies key terms and activities that are significant within the framework of this study.

College choice. As students navigate their college searches, they experience a variety of factors that will influence whether they choose to attend college, and if they do, which school they will attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

College enrollment process. The college enrollment process is defined as the time between when a student commits to an institution by submitting their enrollment deposit and the time they enroll in courses at that school.

College recruitment process. The college recruitment process aligns with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) search phase within their three-phase model. "This, at the same time students are searching for institutions, institutions are searching for students" (p. 213). Students are actively being recruited by colleges and universities during their college recruitment process.

Financial aid. As students apply for college, they are also able to apply for federal financial aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). However, institutions are also able to provide money for students through institutional aid (grants) through a formula calculation to help offset the stated cost of attendance at each institution (Hurwitz, 2012). The FAFSA calculates what the family can be expected to contribute, which is how both federal and institutional aid is determined (Hurwitz, 2012).

College Recruitment Practices

This study examined the factors considered by prospective student-athletes through the lens of the recruitment and enrollment process each athlete experienced, so it is important to have a broader understanding of the field of college admissions beyond simply looking at college choice. College choice models and the college search process have been used as a framework to study other areas related to the college admissions process, including college viewbooks/publications (Hartley et al., 2008; Klassen, 2001; Stark & Marchese, 1978), college visits to high schools (Kealy & Rockel, 1987), campus visits (Secore, 2018a), and university websites (Del Vecchio, 2017; Kittle & Ciba, 2001).

Students learn about colleges and universities, and develop their own perceptions of institutions, based on information gained through a variety of mediums. Although the admission office plays a central role in providing access to information for prospective students, another area that has significant influence is the marketing office, or personnel, at an institution. An effective marketing strategy for a college or university utilizes knowledge of the market and key competitors to frame how the school will strategically approach marketing (Paulsen, 1990). While this research does not focus explicitly on the marketing materials each student receives, it is still important to recognize these efforts. Students currently navigating their college searches are looking for authentic storytelling to learn about each of the schools they are considering (Carnegie, 2018). As technology has expanded and provided more opportunities for student engagement over the past 8 years, I have seen a shift in how messages are conveyed to prospective students throughout their college searches. Students are seeking information from institution websites, but also social media websites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram (Carnegie, 2018). Additionally, in a 2019 survey by Ruffalo Noel Levitz, text messaging scored

3.49 on a 5-point scale in terms of perceived effectiveness by students going through their college searches (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019).

In addition to the impact of technology on messaging to prospective students, the students themselves have altered the way schools communicate with them. Students graduating from high school are a part of a new generation that has different experiences and new expectations for colleges and universities. Students entering college during this time period are part of Generation Z (Gen Z); this generation reached the college-going age in 2013 (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). While exact definitions of each generation according to birth years varies, it is typically accepted that Gen Z students were born in the mid to late 1990s through 2010 (Fromm & Read, 2018). Students from this generation are new to college campuses; however, they will be a primary target audience for college and university admission offices throughout the next decade.

It is important for college admission professionals to understand the experiences of this generation because those experiences have shaped their views of the world, along with how they respond to various sales and marketing tactics often employed by colleges and universities. "Generation Z has been profoundly shaped by the advancement of technology, issues of violence, a volatile economy, and social justice movements" (Seemiller & Grace, 2017, p. 22). Students from this generation were experiencing their formative years during events like September 11th, the rise of ISIS, and the great recession (Fromm & Read, 2018). Despite some similarities, such as the ability to understand and navigate technology, Gen Z students have significant differences from Millennial students of the previous generation (Fromm & Read, 2018).

A History of the NCAA

Of the nearly 530,000 NCAA athletes, over 36% are currently competing at Division III institutions (Division III 2020-2021, 2020). Division III student-athletes, outside of the spotlight of Division I athletics, still take pride in their athletic accomplishments and commit time and energy to their sport and into conducting a comprehensive college search. Colleges and universities that are members of Division III also recognize the impact of athletics, as 71% of enrollment managers highlighted prospective athletes as a key strategy for enrollment growth (NCAA, 2018). Specifically, as a prospective student at a Division III college or university, student-athletes must consider and weigh a variety of factors as they navigate their college choice.

The Division III level of the NCAA was established in 1973 during a reorganization of the association (Our Three Divisions, 2020). As a relatively new element within college athletics, Division III has experienced significant growth in terms of membership; however, relatively little is still known about the division by the general public (Our Three Divisions, 2020). The division is currently comprised of 449 active institutions across 44 conferences (Division III 2020-2021, 2020). Division III focuses on the well-being of the complete student and promotes athletics and academics with equal importance as values across the division (Division III 2020-2021, 2020). Students compete at a high level while also receiving a strong academic experience (NCAA, 2018). Additionally, student-athletes at Division III institutions are required to be treated in the same manner as the other students who attend the school (Division III 2020-2021, 2020). The fairness of treatment for student-athletes should include admission criteria, academic standing, and academic progress throughout their academic experience at the institution (NCAA, 2020).

The leadership of Division III understands the importance of recruiting students to participate in athletic programs for institutions across the division; this can be seen in their establishment of a recruitment guide for coaches and institutions. Collaboration across campus, specifically with the admissions office, and reflection on enrollment practices are critical for successful recruitment of prospective student-athletes (NCAA, 2018). The Division III manual also provides this overview of the recruitment process:

> The recruiting process involves a balancing of the interests of prospective
>
> student-athletes, their educational institutions and the Association's member institutions.
>
> Recruiting regulations shall be designed to promote equity among member institutions in
>
> their recruiting of prospective student-athletes and to shield them from undue pressures
>
> that may interfere with the scholastic or athletic interests of the prospects or their
>
> educational institution. (NCAA, 2020, p. 5)

The Division III manual also provides information on regulations and definitions that are important for coaches and institutions to understand (NCAA, 2020). Providing institutions, coaches, and athletic directors information on policies/regulations and best practices helps to ensure that all institutions remain in compliance with recruitment regulations.

Research Problem

College choice research provides information for enrollment administrators to understand thoughts and motivations for students throughout their college searches. Aside from considering where to attend for academic purposes, athletes have an additional set of factors to consider when deciding where to attend college. All students going through the college search may also have considerations outside of college for what to do after high school (Perna, 2006) so that should be a consideration as well. Access to relevant and accurate information is important for

all students who are exploring their college options (Perna, 2006). Student-athletes must consider their academic experiences, their non-athletic co-curricular involvement, and their athletic involvement at the institution; research has yet to explore how these prospective student athletes are navigating the process as they are going through it and making decisions based on the information they are provided and the recruitment experiences they are going through.

Research on college choice for collegiate athletes has focused on each of the three divisions of the NCAA (e.g., Division I, II, and III), along with the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). Some of these studies have explored specific sports, whereas others have looked at athletics and athletes more holistically across one or more divisions. Studies focused on college choice factors for collegiate athletics have utilized general college choice models, along with previous studies on student-athlete choice to provide the framework for their studies. Many of the studies conducted on college choice factors for student-athletes focus simply on the stated factors for their decision, such as school size, cost of attendance, location, and so forth, through quantitative research. Little has been done to explore what those factors mean or the context in which students experienced those factors throughout their college searches. As researchers have explored each factor's influence on student choice, they have often neglected an examination of the role and influence on both process and decision that family members and other key stakeholders may have.

College athletes are an important population for institutions to consider across all divisions. However, I believe it is important to consider and explore the process specifically for prospective Division III institutions. The NCAA provides resources to assist coaches and athletic administrators at Division III institutions in understanding recruitment process and practices to effectively recruit student-athletes (NCAA, 2018). However, none of the research on college

choice explores specific recruitment practices of Division III student-athletes. The NCAA may highlight "best practices," but without an adequate understanding of what prospective student-athletes experience and consider throughout their searches, it is difficult to truly verbalize effective recruitment processes and practices for Division III institutions. Although some studies have been conducted on college choice for Division III athletes, the information is limited. "Clearly there is a need for additional research with regard to NCAA Division III programs in general, and particularly when considering financial aid variables" (Bandre, 2011, p. 40). It is important to understand the process, experiences, and thoughts of prospective Division III student-athletes because they are an important demographic within admission offices as they strategize how to bring in their incoming class (NCAA, 2018). The resources provided by the NCAA highlight the importance the association sees for this group, yet the research has not been conducted to ensure practices being utilized are effective in recruiting prospective student-athletes.

Similarly, much of the research on college choice and the search process involves conversations on cost and financial aid. NCAA rules and regulations prevent institutions at the Division III level from providing students with financial aid or scholarships for their athletic participation. Without financial aid that is directly related to their athletic accomplishments or abilities, the process may be more complex and involve additional opportunities and/or barriers for students throughout their college searches. A more thorough understanding of the recruitment and enrollment process for prospective Division III athletes will provide enrollment and athletic administrators more opportunities to successfully recruit their prospective student-athletes and address potential concerns or barriers related to financial aid and cost. These opportunities will

allow for more effective budgeting practices, both in terms of financial resources and human resources throughout the recruitment process.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to explore the recruitment and enrollment process for Division III athletic recruits. During this study, the recruitment and enrollment process was defined as the interactions between prospective student-athletes and college or university faculty, staff, administrators, and current students during their recruitment process. The enrollment process was generally defined as the period after the student commits to the institution through their enrollment in coursework at the institution. Rather than reflecting on these experiences after going through it, this study provided access into the experience as they were still going through the process as seniors in high school.

Additionally, this basic interpretive study provided insight into the thoughts students had about the influence of family members and other key stakeholders on the decisions they made throughout the process. Increasing access to higher education for students, and providing them with the right institutional fit where they can be successful and move into the workforce upon graduation, has benefits for the student, the institution, and society (Perna, 2006). If athletic and enrollment administrators can understand the process as a student experiences it while they are being recruited, they will have a more thorough understanding of how to connect the needs of each student with what the institution has to offer. With a better understanding of the process, recruiters can be more genuine with the information they provide and, hopefully, enroll students who are a good fit for the institution athletically and academically.

Research Questions

Three questions guided the research for this study:

1. How do prospective student-athletes at Division III institutions describe their recruitment process?

2. How do prospective Division III student-athletes perceive the influence of college choice factors during their college choice?

3. How do Division III student-athletes perceive the role of their parents/guardians throughout their college search?

Scope of Study

To gain insights into the recruitment and enrollment process, this study explored the prospective Division III student-athlete college search through a basic interpretive study. "Interpretive qualitative research focuses on meaning making as a reflexive, complex, and continuous process" (Manning & Kunkel, 2014, p. 435). Basic interpretive qualitative research allows researchers to utilize the thoughts and experiences of participants to highlight these experiences in a way that may otherwise be unknown (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Through conversations with participants, this study allowed students to speak about their experiences while being recruited, along with what was important to them as they made decisions throughout the process.

Methodology

This study on the recruitment and enrollment process placed a qualitative lens on the college choice process that captures student experiences throughout the process, along with their thoughts on the impact of the various recruitment materials and efforts. Additionally, as students navigated their college searches, this study paid attention to their college choice factors, how they came to define those factors, and how the factors influenced their ultimate decisions.

Finally, the study explored and gave a voice to how the students viewed the involvement of their parents throughout their college searches.

I utilized data from previous studies on student-athletes within Division III, along with NCAA Division I and II and the NAIA, to influence my approach when talking with students about the recruitment process and, ultimately, the process of enrolling at their selected institutions. Key college choice factors are consistently seen across the research on college choice for student-athletes, so the qualitative nature of this study can help expand upon those factors that have already been identified through studies as important for students who are reflecting on their search. Quantitative research on college choice should help inform research done on the subject through qualitative measures (Perna, 2006). Additionally, I was able to utilize general college email communications that were sent from colleges to prospective students as a catalyst to speak with the students in this study about the impact communications had on their college choices. As we spoke about the sample communications, we discussed the content being delivered, but also who the information was coming from and the tone of the message(s).

Constructivist Perspective

Throughout this study, I utilized a constructivist perspective. The constructivist perspective focuses on how people make meaning of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, "the goal of the research [constructivist] is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). In this basic interpretive study, I utilized interviews and a follow-up focus group to gain access into how students viewed their experiences and constructed their reality of their college search process, not simply at looking what is happening. This basic interpretive study also aligns with the

constructivist approach, as constructivists are less concerned about generalizing research than understanding how individuals within a specific context experience their situation (Patton, 2002). While the college choice factors are important considerations within my study, I specifically worked to hear about the reality each student constructed of their college search and how they made meaning throughout the process in order to reach their final college choice decision.

Significance of Study

As college admissions and enrollment management continues to develop as a profession (Hodum & James, 2010) and analytics and data are utilized more frequently to provide information for enrollment planning and projections (Muhammad & McManus, 2018), it is important for professionals to be strategic in their recruitment planning and execution. It is also important for enrollment and admission professionals to understand the various student populations and their motivations for enrolling at one school over the rest of their college options.

This study was designed to provide insight into the recruitment and enrollment process for prospective Division III student-athletes as they navigated the process. Rather than listening to students provide feedback after the process, this study will enable enrollment professionals to hear about the process in real-time, as the students experienced it. Qualitative research allows understanding of the college search process for prospective students (Perna, 2006). Student insight into their college search experience may be altered once they selected and enrolled at an institution; this research provided a direct insight into the process as it occurred. The information from this study provided perceptions and meaning-making of their recruitment experiences which coaches and enrollment administrators can look to for greater understanding about the experiences of prospective student-athletes during their college searches.

The data gathered during this study provided useful information for enrollment managers as they work to capitalize on the student-athlete population to meet their enrollment goals. How do prospective student-athletes respond differently to admission officers versus coaches, or to email versus direct mail? My research explored these types of questions to help enrollment managers be strategic in their efforts to build a class. Athletic coaches and departments will also find this study helpful as they work to recruit the student-athletes that will help their programs to be successful. This study can help these coaches understand the communication and recruitment strategies to which students respond best, along with providing a greater understanding of how they are influenced by things such as the campus visit or the team atmosphere. Additionally, the NCAA could find use in this study as they highlight key practices for successful athlete recruitment. Regardless of the population or their reasons for exploring effective practices for recruitment of student-athletes at Division III institutions, this study also provided a voice to students going through the process, rather than simply completing a survey to indicate how influential each factor was for them after making a college selection.

As students, and specifically student-athletes for this study, progressed through the stages of their college searches, it was important to examine the complexities of the process to best understand their experiences and interpretations. "Both approaches [qualitative and quantitative] are important for developing a comprehensive understanding of student college choice in general, and of the student-college-choice experiences and processes of students of different groups in particular" (Perna, 2006, p. 124). Institutions are investing time and money into market research and marketing strategies to attract students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), so an understanding of this information can help administrators at institutions be more thoughtful and intentional in those efforts.

Additionally, parents go through their own process during a student's college search, which may influence the student's choice; this was also examined within this study from the student perspective. Students gave insight into their interactions with parents/guardians throughout their involvement with this study. A 2018 study of Division III student-athletes found that family and friends tended to be the most influential on a student's college search (NCAA, 2018). Parents and students are often going through the college search together, narrowing the school options, and ultimately being comfortable with the fit for the student at their selected institution (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000). Each student was also asked to share information about how their parent/guardian(s) influenced the decisions they made at each stage throughout their search. The insight from the students on the involvement by, and influence from, their parents/guardians allowed me to understand the role they played in the college search for each participant.

Conclusion

Throughout the first chapter, I have set the stage for my research on the recruitment and enrollment process for prospective Division III student-athletes. In setting the stage, it is important to provide definitions to ideas and terminology within college admissions to help offer an understanding of language that was used throughout this paper. Additionally, I provided the research questions that drove this research, along with an overview of the methodology and paradigm that kept the study grounded. Finally, I reviewed the significance of this study within the context of previous studies related to student college choice.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of literature focuses on three specific sections: college choice models as a conceptual framework, research on general college choice with a specific focus on college choice for student-athletes, and an understanding of admission and marketing practices for prospective students. The conceptual framework identified within this review also includes a historical perspective on the development of college choice models, as the first model was introduced in 1981. I also compare research on college choice for various student populations, along with research exploring parents'/guardians' choice factors and their involvement in their child's college search process. I provide additional attention to the topic of college choice for athletes in order to provide a foundation for the research I conducted on prospective Division III student-athletes. Finally, I examined admission and marketing practices for the recruitment of prospective students, which included a variety of items, such as publications and websites.

History of College Choice Models

A recent development over the past 40 years has been for college admission officers to consider and explore college choice factors. Understanding which factors students consider throughout their college search allows for more effective recruitment by colleges and universities (Paulsen, 1990). College choice factors include resources, influences, and context throughout a student's college search (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018; Perna, 2006). Resources that a student has may be a college fund that was created by their family, or simply access to a school counselor who will help them navigate their college search. Influences may include a school counselor, but may also include family and friends or things a prospective

student hears or sees on social media websites or mobile applications such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

The college choice models attempt to take an abstract concept related to how students make their decisions about where to attend college, and place some parameters that give admission professionals guidance on what influences students as they make their choice (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018; Perna, 2006). As these models have built upon the ideas and concepts of one another, they have continued to increase their focus on diverse populations and various contexts in which students make their college selections. The conceptual framework for this study is the 2006 model of college choice by Laura Perna (Appendix A). However, to fully understand the model, it is important to recognize and understand the development of college choice models.

Chapman's (1981) Model of College Choice

Chapman (1981) recognized that no wide-spread model existed to explain the factors that students considered during their college search/choice process. "Lacking such a model, colleges may overlook ways to increase the effectiveness of their recruiting or, conversely, overestimate the influence of recruiting activities in which they do engage" (Chapman, 1981, p. 490). Chapman's model focused on internal and external influences that impacted college life expectations and an ultimate college choice for each student. Internal characteristics that influenced a student's college choice are characteristics of the student, such as socioeconomic status, aptitude, educational aspirations, and high school performance; whereas external influences include other people they interact with during their search, college characteristics, and college recruitment efforts (Chapman, 1981).

Chapman's (1981) model of college choice took a relatively abstract idea that received little attention within college admissions and provided some structure to engage professionals in a conversation on college choice. Prior to Chapman's research, institutions were seeing enrollment growth and were not focused on how to strategically improve enrollment, and few theories existed to help guide administrators (Chapman, 1981). Although the model highlights factors in the college choice process, no attention is given to the specific processes that students go through as they explore institutions and make a decision on where they would like to attend.

Litten (1982) reviewed Chapman's (1981) model to highlight the various components within a student's college search process. Chapman's model appropriately summarized any previous research on college choice and assembled a model that focused on the outcomes of the search process (Litten, 1982). Despite an appropriate foundation for the model, Litten found that the model was limited because it was fairly basic and lacked attention to the overall process. Additionally, Litten utilized the foundation of Chapman's model to describe a more holistic view of the college search process that students experience as they explore their college options.

A 1999 study on decision-making behavior in Great Britain also utilized Chapman's (1981) model in the creation of a five-stage process students go through as they make their college selection (Moogan et al., 1999). Specifically, Moogan et al. highlighted the internal and external factors and characteristics that influence a student's college decision. Chapman's model is often included among other studies and models related to college choice, but does not receive a significant amount of focus on more recent studies on the topic.

Chapman's (1981) model helped serve as the foundation for Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model on college choice, which has been cited at a high volume across the literature related to college choice. The three-phase model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) was

grounded in studies, including Chapman's model, that were developmental. Additionally,

Hossler and Gallagher cited Chapman's model in relation to the internal and external forces that

are influential in the decision a student makes about where to attend college.

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) divided the college search process into three distinct

phases: predisposition, search, and choice. During the predisposition phase of the college search,

students are examining their beliefs about what they should do after high school and deciding if

they should pursue enrollment at a college or university (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In the

search phase, students are actively seeking to learn more information about colleges and

universities, whereas universities are starting to look at these students as prospective students

more actively at their institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In the final phase of a student's

college search, the choice phase, the student looks to narrow their choice set into a single

institution at which they intend to enroll (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Predisposition Phase

Students going through the predisposition phase are significantly influenced by their

socioeconomic status and their academic achievements thus far (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Additionally, since students are still determining if they even want to attend college, institutions

have little influence on the decisions students make during this phase. However, students who

live close to a college campus are more likely to make the decision to attend college after high

school than students who live further away (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Predisposition is also

influenced by parents and peers who interact with students going through the process (Hossler &

Gallagher, 1987). Hossler and Gallagher explained that this phase had thus far received the least

amount of focus prior to the development of their model, and therefore it is the least understood.

Search Phase

"Within the search phase, potential matriculants start to seek more information about colleges and universities" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 213). Information on colleges and universities is critical during the search phase of a student's college search, as misconceptions about college costs and financial aid have an impact upon which institutions a student chooses to explore (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). During the search phase of their college search, students are interpreting the information they receive and utilizing it to finalize their choice set. The choice set is the list of schools a student decides to explore further and apply to for admission (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Choice Phase

During the final phase of a student's college search, students evaluate their choice set (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). At the end of the choice phase, each student narrows their college options to one school to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The choice phase, and ultimate student decision, is impacted by the applicant's preferences, the attributes of the school, and the outreach efforts made by the institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Model Utilization

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model highlights information on how colleges and universities can utilize the model in their recruitment efforts for prospective students. The optimal time for institutions to initiate their communication with prospective students is during the search phase of the model. The initial communication from colleges and universities should be broad and general, rather than providing too many specific details on the individual college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The college search process, and college choice, are complex topics; however, understanding choice factors students consider during their college

search and the implications of various demographic and personal information can help admission professionals recruit more effectively (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The Model in Research

The three-phase model has been extremely valuable in the development of research on college choice, and has been utilized by researchers and practitioners who have an interest in how students make their college decisions. Several studies that are specifically focused on college choice of student-athletes have utilized the three-phase model by Hossler and Gallagher (1987; e.g., Gabert et al., 1999; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007; Lim et al., 2017). The three-phase model was also utilized in several studies related to general issues regarding student college choice (Dawes & Brown, 2005; Galotti & Mark, 1994; Perna, 2006; Strayhorn et al., 2008; Toma & Cross, 1998). Across the research on college choice, Hossler and Gallagher's three-phase model is attributed with coming up with the ideas of predisposition, search, and choice phases of the college search.

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model has influenced and led college choice research; however, it appears to take a very linear, one-size-fits-all approach to the topic. Despite the positive impact this model has had on the development of college choice, the structure and simplicity of the model neglects nuances of the college search and choice process for minority populations and marginalized groups (Cox, 2016). Similarly, the Hossler and Gallagher model fails to account for circumstances that students may experience throughout their college search process that would disrupt the linear path from high school to college (Cox, 2016).

Iloh's (2018) Model

A more recent college choice model was conceptualized by Iloh (2018). Within this model, Iloh provides a framework for college choice that is based upon information, time, and

opportunity for prospective students. This model is based on an ecological approach, which highlights the specific influences of context and environments on students as they go through the college decision process (Iloh, 2018). Previous models of college choice have highlighted context, but Iloh addressed the issue within the core of her research. Specific contexts are identified by Iloh, including the contexts of time, information, and opportunity.

Students who are considering their post-secondary options live within a variety of contexts and have different influences on their lives (Iloh, 2018); this model takes those variances into account. The context of opportunity considers both perceived and real opportunities for students regarding college; students with fewer opportunities, or perceived opportunities, have a different context than those with more (Iloh, 2018). The context of information relates to the inequitable creation and distribution of college information (Iloh, 2018). The context of time

> Draws attention to the social, educational, and historical events that may have led to a particular college decision or path. In doing so, it can account for the student who is going to college for the first time directly out of high school and for the older person with some college experience but no degree, now enrolling in their third college. (Iloh, 2018, p. 237)

I believe that a strength of Iloh's model is that it highlights the privileged nature of college being positioned as a "choice" for students rather than focusing on the contexts and systems of oppression that may prevent the enrollment at any or all institutions for a student (Iloh, 2018). Iloh's focus on contexts enables choice to be viewed more broadly than simply a student interpreting information presented to them by colleges and deciding based on those factors.

Selecting a Framework

Iloh's (2018) model is relatively new and can potentially help shape future conversations on student choice and college access. However, for my study on student-athletes and their college choice for Division III institutions, I believe Perna's (2006) proposal conceptual model provides an appropriate framework. Perna clearly identified four layers of context that were referenced and considered as I explored how the participants navigated their recruitment and enrollment processes at Division III institutions. The other models on college choice were useful throughout the study as well, with the stages of the search process from Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and the significance of the context of time, opportunity, and information being critical considerations when examining college choice. Perna identified a need to utilize her model for research focused on specific populations of students going through their college search. While she identified these populations specific to race, sex, or socioeconomic status, I believe it is important to consider populations such as student-athletes.

Conceptual Framework: Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model

In order to expand upon the simplicity and oversight of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model, Perna (2006) developed a conceptual model of college choice that served as the conceptual framework for this study. The three-phase model from Hossler and Gallagher (1987) was still utilized by Perna as part of the foundation for her model on college choice. In addition to the three-phase model, Perna's model also draws on an economic model of human capital investment and a sociological model of status attainment. The economic model of human capital investment, as it relates to higher education, indicates that students are considering both the perceived costs and benefits of a college education throughout their college search (Perna, 2006). Additionally, "sociological approaches are useful for understanding the ways in which

context, influenced in part by structural constraints and opportunities, shapes an individual's perspectives about and orientations toward college choice" (Perna, 2006, p. 114).

These influences are prevalent in Perna's (2006) model. The framework of the model includes four layers of context that impact a student's college choice: " (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context" (Perna, 2006, p. 116). Within this model, only two of the four layers can be influenced by a college or university—the higher education context and the school and community context, which is the layer with the greatest potential for colleges and universities to influence (Perna, 2006). As a student progresses through their college search, the process is different for all students rather than being a unified, linear process as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model alluded to within previous research. Students experience direct and indirect influences throughout their college searches that range from various contexts and environments they experience, along with the people with whom they interact throughout their college searches (Perna, 2006).

The Individual's Habitus

The layer of an individual's habitus focuses on specific characteristics of the student, including their demographic information and their cultural and social capital (Perna, 2006). Perna described cultural capital as "cultural knowledge and the value placed on college attainment" (p. 138) and social capital as access to people (family and school counselors) who can provide information about and assistance during the college search. Whereas colleges and universities cannot influence a person's habitus, admission officers should be aware that these student characteristics provide a lens through which they are examining the school during their search, and they will ultimately impact a student's college choice.

School and Community Context

The school and community context focuses on the structures in place, and the resources available, that influence students through their college searches (Perna, 2006). Some schools may offer curricular options that align with a student's college and career aspirations that serve in a capacity to help students have more opportunities during their college search (Perna, 2006). Some of the structures in place may negatively influence some groups of students throughout the process more than other students (Perna, 2006). If some students have access to resources, such as the courses mentioned previously, the students who do not have the same access could be disadvantaged during their college searches. Prospective student-athletes who are going through their college searches have a variety of different resources and structures in place that may restrict or ease the process. For example, a student-athlete may have a coach who is advocating for them throughout the process and working to ensure they have needed support as they make their college choice. Conversely, the student may also have added pressures throughout their search as a result of being an athlete.

Higher Education Context

Recruitment and marketing efforts from colleges and universities fall within the higher education context of a student's college search; this may be done passively or more overtly (Perna, 2006). Aside from the marketing efforts, students are also influenced by the specific characteristics of each institution as they look to make a college choice (Perna, 2006). When examining costs versus benefits of college attendance, the financial aid offered to a student is also a factor that is considered (Perna, 2006). Selectivity of an institution and the availability of enrollment space influence how students view a college or university (Perna, 2006).

Broader Social, Economic, and Policy Context

Students going through their college searches and making their college choices are influenced by broader contexts outside of their own influence and that of their schools or higher education (Perna, 2006). Some potential contexts that could impact college choice are changing demographics, unemployment, or new federal or state policies (Perna, 2006). Influence within this layer of Perna's (2006) conceptual model can be either direct or indirect for each student. A direct influence would be something that directly impacts the student's college search, such as policies related to federal grants offered to students at certain income levels.

Perna's (2006) model on college choice focuses on the students going through the college search process directly out of high school. However, it does offer a foundation to explore college searches for people who do not enter college immediately following high school, as well. The conceptual model can help researchers explore additional dimensions or populations of students, along with analyzing institutional policies and practices for student recruitment (Perna, 2006). For this study, Perna's model serves as a foundation to explore a specific population related to student-athletes who decided to attend a Division III institution. The contexts described within this model can be expanded to include contextual components that are unique to student-athletes who are being recruited by Division III institutions.

The Model in Research

Perna's (2006) conceptual model has been utilized as both a theoretical framework and as an influential source utilized by research across college choice studies among various populations. The type of studies that have utilized Perna's model are varied and extend beyond general college choice; these studies include research related to high school counselors (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014), systems of inequity (Engberg, 2012), high school feeder networks (Wolniak &

Engberg, 2007), college preparatory programs (Jayakumar et al., 2013), online practices of prospective students (Brown et al., 2016), undocumented students (Nienhusser et al., 2016), federal aid programs (Perna et al., 2008), and college choice of students from diverse backgrounds (Bell et al., 2009; Cox, 2016; Engberg & Wolniak, 2014; Nunez & Kim, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Since researchers have been able to utilize Perna's model in a variety of ways, it highlights the versatility and utility of the model.

Engberg (2012) and Engberg and Gilbert (2014) utilized Perna's (2006) model on college choice to highlight the experiences of students prior to their college search and the impact of those experiences on the student's college choice process. School counselors, despite conflicting priorities and growing caseloads of students, are influential in providing information to students and ensuring there is a culture at the school to prepare students for college (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Engberg and Gilbert also positioned school counselors within the framework of Perna's model in the context of both the school and community context and the social, economic, and policy context. Engberg (2012) expanded upon Perna's model as an example of economic models that evaluate costs and benefits students consider throughout their college searches.

Jayakumar et al. (2013) also incorporated key elements of Perna's (2006) model within their study, *Pathways to College for Young Black Scholars.* Specifically, the cultural capital element of Perna's model is highlighted through the lens of their study on young African American students seeking knowledge of and preparation for college (Jayakumar et al., 2013). While Jayakumar et al. utilized Perna's model, the researchers also indicated the model does not explicitly discuss the disruption of inequities that non-White students face throughout their college searches. Other researchers (Brown et al., 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016) also utilized Perna's model to understand barriers and resources for students as they navigate their college

searches. Perna's model helped these researchers by providing a contextual lens to examine specific environments for students going through the search process (Brown et al., 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Several additional studies incorporate Perna's (2006) model into their research on diverse student populations. Cox (2016) specifically used Perna's model as a conceptual framework because her model provided context within the four layers to better understand the process for students from diverse populations. Within a longitudinal study of 16 students from diverse inner-city high schools starting in 11th grade through one year after high school graduation, the elements of context, resources, and barriers are prevalent within Cox's study. Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2008) also utilized Perna's model as a conceptual framework in a multiple case study on the impact of school context on parental involvement and the impact of parental involvement on college opportunities. Other elements of Perna's model, higher education context, and state and economic context, were also examined by Rowan-Kenyon et al. Nunez and Kim (2012) developed a model of college choice for Latino students that included three levels of influence that were drawn from Perna's model.

Model Selection

Perna's (2006) conceptual model has been utilized across various studies, which have demonstrated the strength of the model along with some potential limitations. The model does not explicitly focus on components of college choice for every group of people who could be going through the college search, but it does address how the model has a contextual foundation that accounts for differences in student context and experiences. Because of the nature of her model, Perna's conceptual model provides a framework that has been demonstrated as effective when applied to students from all backgrounds. The examination into the contexts in a student's

environment, along with their own personal habitus (Perna, 2006), enable a researcher to apply those ideas to their specific target population. Within this study, I examined the various contexts for prospective student-athletes as they navigated their college searches. Models established prior to Perna's conceptual model failed to take context into account, and Iloh's (2018) model focuses a third of the model on the context of time for students who are unable to, or decide not to, attend college right after high school. The students in my study were high school students looking to go directly into college after high school.

College Choice Research

Before exploring research on college choice for student-athletes, it is important to understand how college choice has been examined and researched more broadly. Examinations of college choice throughout the past several decades have looked at various populations through both quantitative and qualitative studies to document, in different ways, the factors that influenced students as they made their college choices. Since most students go through the college search process only once, the process is not something that is evaluated as the student is going through it or examined critically to see improvement for each student (Hossler et al., 1999). Because of this, students are not able to compare various searches they undertook, but rather reflect on their lone search and provide insight into the factors that influenced them as they made their choice.

Campus Environment

As students navigate a college search, a variety of factors within multiple contexts have an influence on their search. One of the key components that will influence their thoughts throughout the process, and their ultimate choice, is the physical campus and campus environment for each institution they are considering. With the potential impact of the physical

campus and campus environment on a student's choice, one of the critical experiences for

prospective students is their visit to campus (Johnston, 2010; Secore, 2018a). During the campus

visit there are several events that take place; however, the campus tour is one of the most critical

elements because it allows the prospective student to hear directly from a current student and

hear their story (Secore, 2018a). The tour is also a place where prospective students can hear

stories that highlight the uniqueness of each campus (Secore, 2018b). Tour guides should

provide a meaningful experience for prospective students through informative tours given in a

friendly manner (Moogan et al., 1999).

Aside from hearing from a current student, prospective students also consider the people

who work at the institution (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). Interactions with faculty and staff are

important because the relationships that prospective students can envision with these individuals

are critical to their college choice (Johnston, 2010). These relationships can be initiated or further

developed during a visit to campus through classroom observations or setting up meetings with

faculty members from their intended major or other pertinent staff members. Additionally,

prospective students will be able to see how faculty and staff are interacting organically through

observations while they are on campus.

As students visit campuses, it is also important that they see the physical space and hear

about the environment. "More often than not, students simply identify with a welcoming and

affable atmosphere where their potential peers are ostensibly benevolent, happy, enthusiastic,

and proud constituents of their respective institutions" (Secore, 2018b, p. 18). Seeing the

facilities can also impact a student, since the presence and condition of specific facilities

influence a student's college choice, as well (Reynolds, 2006). The top five facilities that

students ranked as important during their decision process were facilities within their major (lab

spaces, program-specific study areas, etc.), the library, sophisticated technology, classrooms, and residence halls; four of these five items are directly related to the academic experience for students (Reynolds, 2006). Similarly, parents ranked facilities overall as one of the top five factors they would consider as their student considered a college or university (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000). Understanding institutional context is also important as students at private institutions saw favorable facilities as more important during their college searches than students at public schools (Reynolds, 2006). Admission professionals should be cognizant of the physical spaces on their campuses to ensure campus tours are highlighting facilities that are relevant for each specific student and those that have a positive impact on a student's decision.

Campus Safety

Another important choice factor related to the campus environment is the safety of the campus (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). When comparing male and female students, campus safety has a greater influence on female students during their college search (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). Overall, parents also placed a greater emphasis on campus safety than students do throughout their search (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). Among parents, those with a daughter looking at college considered physical risks, including campus safety, to be a more important choice factor than those with a son going through the process (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). It is important for admission professionals to recognize the needs and concerns of parents throughout the student's college search, as they are two of the top five influencers on a student during this process (Johnston, 2010).

Cost and Financial Aid

Another important factor that influences students during their college search is how much they will pay for their education; this can be seen from factors of both cost and financial aid throughout the research on college choice (Bell et al., 2009; Braddock & Hua, 2006; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurwitz, 2012; Lillis & Tian, 2008; Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). Additionally, on a practical level, enrollment professionals recognize the significance of cost and financial aid by highlighting affordability within their messaging to prospective students (Lillis & Tian, 2008). College costs are a common discussion among the media, but also among politicians. In 2006, Congress passed the College Access and Opportunity Act to prevent institutions from making large increases in their tuition costs year after year (Lillis & Tian, 2008). Given the attention to cost and affordability, admission officers should be prepared to have a conversation with prospective students and their parents about the cost of attendance at their institution.

While Lillis and Tian (2008) conducted research that showed the importance of cost varies between students, others have shown a more consistent impact of cost. Broekemier and Seshadri (2000), for instance, found that cost is a top five choice factor among parents and students when selecting a college. Similarly, financial risks, including tuition, scholarships, and financial aid, were the top factor for all students and parents of male students, while being the second most important factor for parents of female students (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). Additionally, Mansfield and Warwick found that men were more concerned with the cost than women, but women placed more importance on all the items related to financial aid, including scholarships. Costs become more influential in a student's choice considerations the later they get in their high school career and the closer they get to selecting a college (Hossler et al., 1999).

When considering financial aid, Hurwitz (2012) asserted that an increase of $1,000 in grant aid contributed to an increase in their probability to enroll by 1.66 percentage points.

Additional issues with financial aid stem from a lack of early communication about costs and financial aid processes (Bell et al., 2009; Braddock & Hua, 2006). When comparing 9th and 11th grade students, both groups have some familiarity with the concept of financial aid, but more information is known by students in 11th grade (Bell et al., 2009). Despite having more information on financial aid, the process was still vague for 11th graders and they could not articulate the actual cost of college (Bell et al., 2009). A student's understanding of financial aid and willingness to take out loans to offset the costs of education varied according to the student's socio-economic status (Bell et al., 2009). Even if information is presented to students, if a student comes from a background with complex family situations, the complexities of the financial aid process are unclear and can serve as a barrier to enrollment, regardless of the choice a student wants to make about where to attend (Cox, 2016).

Academics

Across the literature, choice factors related to academics consistently rank among the top factors in consideration by students and their parents. "Items associated with academic and career outcomes and financial aid considerations are rated as significantly more important than items associated with demographic or social considerations" (Braddock & Hua, 2006, p. 537). An institution offering a student's first choice major is an important choice factor for both students and parents (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Reynolds, 2006). Similarly, "when comparing all four groups, male students, female students, male parents, and female parents, the only criterion that was consistently in the top five was academics" (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005, p. 77). Despite academics being an important choice factor for both male students and female

students, female students overall placed a greater importance on academics than male students (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). Other important choice factors related to academics include quality teachers (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005; Reynolds, 2006), faculty (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005; Reynolds, 2006), and career preparation and outcomes (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Mansfield & Warwick, 2005; Reynolds, 2006). Broekemier and Seshadri (2000) also indicated that parents place significance on the academic reputation of an institution during their child's college search.

Influence From Family and Friends

When considering college choice through the lens of Perna's (2006) model, it is important to also understand choice factors, and influences on those factors, that may be unrelated to a specific institution or how they are "selling" the university to prospective students. These influences relate to the various contexts described by Perna. While parents see themselves as being influential in their child's search process, students see their influence as being even greater during the decision-making process (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000). Not only are parents influential as students make their college choice, they also impact the predisposition phase of a student's search (Paulsen, 1990). Aside from family and university employees, friends who attend the university are a strong source of information that influence a prospective student's opinion of an institution (Johnston, 2010). Admission officers at colleges and universities should be aware of the impact of a student's support system throughout their search, specifically the role of parents, in order to provide information that is important to them throughout the process.

Additionally, college access organizations may provide additional resources for students throughout their college search (Jayakumar et al., 2013). College access organizations include groups such as Upward Bound or College Now, which focus on helping students access

information and resources to prepare for college. Specifically, African American students who experience resistance to their college plans or lack support at their high schools can find successful support through access or community-based organizations (Jayakumar et al., 2013). Even when African American students experience support at their high schools, involvement in these types of organizations allows for the development and growth of cultural wealth to assist them throughout their college search (Jayakumar et al., 2013).

Student and Family Characteristics

In addition to external influences throughout a student's college search, who the student is matters throughout the process, too. Parental educational attainment has a strong impact on the decisions a student will make throughout their college search (Dawes & Brown, 2005; Litten, 1982; Perna, 2000). The educational level of the mother is more impactful than the educational level of the student's father (Dawes & Brown, 2005). Students coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and who are first-generation students also have additional barriers during their college searches (Bell et al., 2009; Cox, 2016; McDonough, 1994; Perna, 2000). Specifically, students who are first-generation and have not had a parent previously graduate from college tend to over-rely on family and friends throughout their college searches; because their family members and friends may not have attended college, the information they can provide to the student may be less accurate and incomplete compared to their peers whose family and friends have attended college (Bell et al., 2009). Students who come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have greater access to resources throughout the process (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). This access may be additional preparation for standardized testing, individual college consultants, or being able to have an expanded college search beyond the schools in the immediate vicinity.

College Choice and Student-Athletes

As research on college choice factors continues to evolve, additional research has been conducted on specific populations, including prospective college athletes. Research on college choice for prospective student-athletes provides useful information; however, the research is still limited and much of the findings thus far have been inconsistent across studies. Research in this area has been conducted on both individual sports and looking more holistically at athlete college choice across various sports and divisions. No specific model of student-athlete college choice has been established, so most of the research relies on various general college choice models to situate their studies. Many of these studies do, however, utilize instruments that have been created specifically for athlete college choice; the two main instruments that have been used within a study or to establish their own instrument across the research are the Student Athlete College Choice Profile Survey (Gabert et al., 1999; Goss et al., 2006; Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Lim et al., 2017) and Influential Factors Survey for Student Athletes (Pauline, 2010; Pauline et al., 2004).

The Student Athlete College Choice Profile Survey and Influential Factors Survey for Student Athletes were both developed as tools to measure how student-athletes rank the various factors in the college choice they made. The Student Athlete College Choice Profile Survey was established by Gabert et al. (1999) through conversations with athletic administrators at colleges and universities; this included the establishment of a ranking of 23 college choice factors. This survey has students rank each factor on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranges from no influence to a great deal of influence (Gabert et al., 1999). The Influential Factors Survey for Student Athletes was established by Pauline et al. (2004) utilizing research on college choice factors for athletes and a small panel of eight athletic administrators. The survey was utilized for a pilot

study to test validity and consists of 30 questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale (Pauline et al., 2004).

One of the earliest studies that sparked the current interest in examining college choice factors among student-athletes was an examination of student-athletes by Gabert et al. (1999). This study examined choice factors for student-athletes at NCAA Division I and II institutions, along with NAIA students. The top five choice factors, in rank order, for student-athletes included the college head coach, location of the school, an opportunity to play, degree programs, and academic support (Gabert et al., 1999). The authors concluded that student-athletes balance academic and athletic factors when making their college choice (Gabert et al., 1999). However, the top two factors were related to athletics and the top academic factor, degree programs, ranked third overall.

Role of Coaches in Recruiting

Athletic coaches spend countless hours working outside of their time coaching to recruit an incoming class for their team. Many coaches spend as much time, or more, working with prospective students throughout the year during recruitment as they spend with the athletes while they are on campus (NCAA, 2018). Coaches are recruiting students in a variety of ways, including emails, phone calls, social media, campus visits, and visiting students at their schools and other camps or showcases (NCAA, 2018). Coaches are allowed to invite prospective student-athletes for official visits to campus after January 1 of their senior year (NCAA, 2018). This gives the coaches a year and a half before a student graduates high school to really focus on building a strong relationship with that prospective student.

Influence of Head Coaches on College Choice

Across studies on student-athlete college choice, the head coach is often identified as a significant factor for prospective student-athletes as they consider their college options. Coaches were also highlighted as the most significant attribute within a means-end investigation of student-athletes' college choice (Klenosky et al., 2001). A means-end approach focuses on the meanings consumers place on tangible items through the consequences of selecting that product and the values the choice exhibits (Klenosky et al., 2001). In this means-end study, the rationale for identifying coaches as an important factor was described further, with statements from participants that coaches will create a comfortable environment for athletes, help students enjoy their experience, and provide them with opportunities to gain playing time while in school (Klenosky et al., 2001). Even in highlighting the same choice factor (head coach) as an important factor in their decision, the consequences seen, and values placed on the factor varied across participants.

Similarly, Lim et al. (2017) asserted,

Because the success of an athlete is often measured and recognized by the role of the coach, intercollegiate coaches leave a lasting impression on prospective student-athletes. This suggests that the college choice decision relies heavily on whether or not the athlete is able to envision him or herself having a comfortable and positive relationship with the coach. (p. 28)

Despite their stated focus on head coaches, Lim et al. (2017) discussed the head coach and coaching staff to be the second most important choice factor for NCAA Division II elite track athletes, behind the opportunity to compete. Coaching also appears to be more impactful during the college search process for male athletes than for female athletes (Pauline, 2010). Aside from

the relationship a prospective student is able to develop with a head coach, the reputation of the head coach has an influence on where prospective athletes choose to enroll (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). In a comparison study on international and domestic student-athletes, both groups of students placed the personality of the head coach in their top five most important choice factors (Popp et al., 2011).

Impact of Academics on College Choice

The NCAA recruitment guide indicates that student-athletes are focused on academics throughout their college searches. In a study conducted of 73 Division I football players, three of their top 10 choices were related to academics, including the top two factors related to job preparation outside of the classroom and the academic value of their degree (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). Additionally, Klenosky et al. (2001) found that, while not one of the top factors, Division I football players considered academics throughout their college searches. Academic factors as a priority for student-athletes vary depending on the study being conducted, and the specific elements related to academics also have variance among the studies. In their study of student-athletes across each of the three NCAA divisions, Gabert et al. (1999) found that Division I athletes prioritize academic support as their top choice factor when considering an institution. International student-athletes attending a Division I institution also place significance on the academic reputation of an institution when considering their choice factors (Popp et al., 2011).

When the focus of the research shifts to smaller institutions and includes students who may not be receiving scholarship monies, some shifts can be seen among how student-athletes prioritize their choice factors. Academics play a more central role as choice factors among Division II and III athletes when compared with Division I students (Pauline, 2010). Goss et al.

(2006) explored college choice among student-athletes at small colleges and universities and found the top choice factor was degree programs at the institution; the survey sample included three NAIA institutions and three NCAA Division III institutions. Students at smaller institutions find value in their classroom and out-of-classroom academic experiences along with the entire athletic experience, rather than simply looking at wins or what their performance could mean for their athletic career after college (Goss et al., 2006). Additionally, athletes who are going through the recruitment process found literature from both the admissions office and athletics office to have little influence on their college choice (Goss et al., 2006).

How Students Perceive Campus Facilities During the College Search

While facilities were said to play a role in the college choice decision among non-student athletes, they were found to have little influence over student-athlete's college choice (Schneider & Messenger, 2012). Schneider and Messenger's study explored the impact of facilities on NCAA Division I hockey players, but found that the opportunity to play immediately and athletic-related financial aid were the top two college choice factors. Questionable reporting of methodology and data analysis call into question the validity of these results. Furthermore, in a study of NCAA Division I athletes, with 38% of the sample coming from football players at a single institution, the athletic facilities were ranked second in influence after only the location of the school (Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015). Students at this southeastern university did not have any academic-related factors within the top three of their college choice factors (Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015). Additionally, athletic facilities were the third most influential choice factor among Division I football players (Klenosky et al., 2001).

The Impact of Cost and Financial Aid on College Choice

Scholarships, financial aid, and cost also appear to be less important college choice factors for student-athletes than for non-athletes searching for a college or university to attend. Only two studies highlighted scholarships or financial aid as one of the top choice factors for domestic student-athletes: Schneider and Messenger's (2012) study on Division I ice hockey players and Lim et al.'s (2017) study on elite Division II track athletes. International student-athletes at Division I institutions, however, were found to rank the value of their athletic scholarship as their top choice factor (Popp et al., 2011). Division III athletes have a unique circumstance with scholarships because "most student athletes choosing to attend a Division III institution are aware the NCAA does not allow Division III institutions to provide athletic-based scholarships; therefore it is not an important factor in their decision-making process" (Pauline, 2010, p. 67). If student-athletes at Division III institutions are not receiving athletic-based scholarships, they may be more inclined to consider cost and financial aid opportunities to be important choice factors for their school selection. A lack of research on the impact of financial aid on Division III student-athletes indicates a need for further research to better understand where this choice factor falls for these students (Bondre, 2011).

Common Themes for Athlete's College Choice

An exploration of lacrosse players across all three of the NCAA divisions provides additional insights about student-athletes' college choice factors when participating in a sport that does not receive the same attention as some of the other collegiate sports. With a lack of professional opportunities for lacrosse players, their top-rated choice factor was career opportunities after graduation (Pauline, 2010). The other top-rated choice factors for these lacrosse players, in rank order, were academic reputation of the university, overall reputation of

the university, availability of academic program or major, and reputation of academic program or major (Pauline, 2010). Students at the Division II and III levels were more focused on skill development and performance than Division I athletes (Pauline, 2010).

Despite some discrepancies among the top choice factors for student-athletes and how student-athletes rank their top three to five factors, there is some overlap in the themes that emerge related to student-athletes' college choice factors. A few outliers in top factors include a school's sports tradition (Schneider & Messenger, 2012), the athletic schedule (Klenosky et al., 2001), and spiritual guidance (Goss et al., 2006). Findings related to male and female athletes' college choice are inconsistent. Gabert et al. (1999) found men and women to have very similar rankings of their choice factors, whereas others indicated more significant differences among their rankings (Goss et al., 2006; Lim et al., 2017; Pauline; 2010). As research on student-athlete college choice continues to advance, "more qualitative studies are needed to uncover the influential factors related to the college selection process that are not completely addressed by the current survey or previous survey research" (Lim et al., 2017, p. 29). Quantitative studies provide a strong foundation that qualitative research could utilize in framing questions for students going through their college search.

Admission and Marketing Practices

As colleges and universities work to recruit students through both active recruitment methods from the admissions office and other marketing efforts from the university, they are looking to influence the college choice process for students within the higher education context of Perna's (2006) model. I have already explored campus visits within this literature review because of their direct influence on a student's college choice. However, additional efforts from admission and marketing offices are still important to consider when framing a conversation on

college choice. Traditional outreach methods to consider are printed materials, such as college viewbooks, and phone call communications. However, advancements in technology have provided an opportunity for recruitment efforts to take place online through school websites and through social media. I have explored policies and practices related to admission and enrollment of students within this study.

Print Materials

When considering print materials sent to prospective students from a college admissions office, an initial piece is often the college viewbook. "Ultimately, the purpose of the college viewbook is to bridge the gap between the demands of the market niche and organizational image" (Klassen, 2001, p. 13). Viewbooks contain information within six thematic areas, including institutional context/campus features, academics/faculty, co-curricular opportunities, admissions and financial aid, the value of an education, and the purpose of higher education (Hartley et al., 2008). However, content within viewbooks will vary depending on institution and institution type (Klassen, 2001). Viewbooks provide information about the university, but are also intended to sell the institution to prospective students and their families. The specific content highlighted in a college viewbook may present itself in an idealistic state, with little mentioned related to struggles or challenges that come up during college (Klassen, 2001). Regardless of the content, viewbooks are designed to be visually attractive with the presence of diverse student populations and opportunities (Hartley et al., 2008).

Online Recruitment

Viewbooks represent a traditional method of communication with prospective students, whereas institution websites and social media are still relatively new developments in student recruitment. According to the State of College Admission Report (Clinedinst, 2019), social

media ranks ninth among recruitment strategies in importance for first-time freshman. While social media ranked outside of the top five, the top two strategies identified by students were email and the school website (Clinedinst, 2019). Colleges first ventured into institutional websites during the 1990s and they saw an increase in their usage and intentionality with prospective students during that time (Kittle & Ciba, 2001). Specifically, within their study, Kittle and Ciba found that institutions were increasing opportunities for students to utilize an online application, find financial aid information, and interact in two-way communication with potential colleges and universities. Like viewbooks, institutions are focused on creating a website that highlights the diversity of students and opportunities on campus (Del Vecchio, 2017).

Brown et al. (2016) examined how students from low-income communities utilized online resources. Similar to Kittle and Ciba (2001) identifying that prospective students seek two-way communication, Brown et al. also identified that students were looking to engage with others throughout the process. Instead of looking to communicate directly with the institution, however, these students were following hashtags on social media and engaging with current students who were already enrolled at the institution (Brown et al., 2016). Given the volume of information that exists online about colleges and universities, both organically and through developed marketing efforts, the information was often complex and confusing for students who did not have resources to access help in understanding what the college was trying to say (Brown et al., 2016). Students also highlighted the use of search engines and websites that compare institutional characteristics (Brown et al., 2016).

Regardless of the medium through which colleges and universities communicate with prospective students, they should have clear objectives for each of their communications in order to ensure consistency of messaging. Students will interpret information from colleges and

universities differently depending on how it is presented to them (Stark & Marchese, 1978).

Given the similarities among recruitment materials, such as college viewbooks (Hartley et al.,

2008; Klassen, 2001), it is important to find ways to differentiate and help the student who is

reading the material understand the key messages. "Students commonly have difficulty

interpreting information in college bulletins or in judging its relevance" (Stark & Marchese,

1978, p. 87). If a student is not able to understand the information presented in recruitment

materials, they may be less likely to engage further with the university or to choose to take the

next step in the application or enrollment process.

Rhetoric in Recruitment

Similarly, institutions will utilize rhetoric when talking with prospective students

throughout the recruitment process. One group of institutions that is attempting to control the

narrative around their schools utilizing rhetoric are liberal arts colleges and universities.

"Selective liberal arts schools define themselves as capable of being all things to all people"

(Ragan & McMillan, 1989, p. 689). Within their marketing materials, liberal arts institutions will

attempt to strike a balance between being academically rigorous while also being attainable to a

more widespread audience to prevent students from self-selecting their inadmissibility (Ragan &

McMillan, 1989). Language is kept broad throughout marketing materials to help a variety of

students find a connection with the content delivered, though this is not done as an attempt to

misinform students (Ragan & McMillan, 1989).

Institutions should be aware of their rhetoric and the content of their marketing and

recruitment materials because they influence how students perceive the institution as they go

through their college search. Students gain information about academic quality and develop an

opinion on said quality from items such as an institutional catalog or their campus visit (Kealy &

Rockel, 1987). The influence of the print materials is limited. However, current students are critical to the development and maintenance of prospective student perceptions about an institution (Kealy & Rockel, 1987). Prospective students are engaging with official institution accounts through social media, but they are also seeking out students who look like them, along with friends they may already have at an institution, to learn more about a school they are considering (Brown et al., 2016).

Financial Aid Materials

Students' thoughts and decisions throughout their college searches may also be influenced by the timing for sending out college information and materials. Financial aid information is a topic that is included in some recruitment and marketing materials. However, the information on financial aid often comes too late in the process to be useful for students and their families (Perna, 2005). Additionally, often financial aid information presented to students focuses on value rather than talking about costs and payment options (Hartley et al., 2008). A greater focus should be given on providing students with useful information during their sophomore and junior years when they are still receptive to information that will help them choose what schools to consider for college (Engberg, 2012). This aligns with Hossler and Gallagher (1987) highlighting the impact on financial aid information within the search phase of a student's college search. Financial aid and cost of college are mysterious to high school students (Bell et al., 2009), so it is important for admission and enrollment officers to help prospective students and their families understand cost and payment options for college. The lack of information on financial aid is most prominent among African American and Hispanic students and students of low-income households (Perna, 2005).

Aside from colleges and universities sending information to students, they may also receive information about financial aid from their high school counselor. School counselors are influential in creating a college-going culture that can help students prepare for college, which includes talking with students about financial aid opportunities and requirements (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). "Students view counselors as having the most knowledge about college-going and financial aid, particularly sources of scholarships" (Bell et al., 2009, p. 674). Although counselors can create this culture at their high school, their opportunities may be limited given the high volume of students with whom counselors work and the multitude of tasks for which they are responsible in their roles (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Students from first-generation and low-income families rely most on counselors for college information (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). College and university admission officers can develop relationships with schools and counselors to be another resource for students as they are navigating their college search.

State and Federal Programs

Students are also influenced by the state and federal programs, along with non-profit organizations who distribute additional financial aid for students. Government programs directed towards providing financial aid are mostly focused on providing funding directly to students, while also having some programs that distribute the money to institutions who then pass it along to students (Perna et al., 2008). Clear polices related to financial aid programs can help facilitate conversations between students and their families about the cost of college (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). College admission officers are able to also communicate relevant information to prospective students and their families to help them understand what opportunities exist within their specific state or community.

Admission Requirements

Regardless of the background a student brings with them into their college search, they are asked to navigate a complex admission and enrollment process that has significant implications on their current and future situations in life. One of the most prominent areas of college admissions are the standardized tests—the ACT and SAT—which are utilized at most institutions to help inform admission decisions. The test scores from these standardized tests often fail to recognize the abilities of minority and low-socioeconomic students as they consistently perform lower on these tests (Atkinson & Geiser, 2009). Aside from test scores, colleges and universities utilize a variety of components within a student's application to make an admission decision. It is important for students to use their resources to learn about the application process and ensure they are preparing for college applications with the decisions they make throughout high school (Richardson, 2008).

A History of the NCAA

Of the nearly 530,000 NCAA athletes, over 36% are currently competing at Division III institutions (Division III 2020-2021, 2020). Division III student-athletes, outside of the spotlight of Division I athletics, still take pride in their athletic accomplishments and commit time and energy to their sport and into conducting a comprehensive college search. Colleges and universities that are members of Division III also recognize the impact of athletics, as 71% of enrollment managers highlighted prospective athletes as a key strategy for enrollment growth (NCAA, 2018). Specifically, as a prospective student at a Division III college or university, student-athletes must consider and weigh a variety of factors as they navigate their college choice.

The Division III level of the NCAA was established in 1973 during a reorganization of the association (Our Three Divisions, 2020). As a relatively new element within college athletics, Division III has experienced significant growth in terms of membership; however, relatively little is still known about the division by the general public (Our Three Divisions, 2020). The division is currently comprised of 449 active institutions across 44 conferences (Division III 2020-2021, 2020). Division III focuses on the well-being of the complete student and promotes athletics and academics with equal importance as values across the division (Division III 2020-2021, 2020). Students compete at a high level while also receiving a strong academic experience (NCAA, 2018). Additionally, student-athletes at Division III institutions are required to be treated in the same manner as the other students who attend the school (Division III 2020-2021, 2020). The fairness of treatment for student-athletes should include admission criteria, academic standing, and academic progress throughout their academic experience at the institution (NCAA, 2020).

The leadership of Division III understands the importance of recruiting students to participate in athletic programs for institutions across the division; this can be seen in their establishment of a recruitment guide for coaches and institutions. Collaboration across campus, specifically with the admissions office, and reflection on enrollment practices are critical for successful recruitment of prospective student-athletes (NCAA, 2018). The Division III manual also provides this overview of the recruitment process:

> The recruiting process involves a balancing of the interests of prospective student-athletes, their educational institutions and the Association's member institutions. Recruiting regulations shall be designed to promote equity among member institutions in their recruiting of prospective student-athletes and to shield them from undue pressures

that may interfere with the scholastic or athletic interests of the prospects or their

educational institution. (NCAA, 2020, p. 5)

The Division III manual also provides information on regulations and definitions that are

important for coaches and institutions to understand (NCAA, 2020). Providing institutions,

coaches, and athletic directors information on policies/regulations and best practices helps to

ensure that all institutions remain in compliance with recruitment regulations.

Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, I spent time highlighting three key college choice

models (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018), along with another model that

was utilized as the conceptual framework for this study (Perna, 2006). Each of the college choice

models described within this chapter examine both personal characteristics of the students going

through the process and any environmental or contextual influences on that process, as well

(Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018; Perna, 2006). Additionally, these

models have influenced the research on college choice that was also examined within this

chapter, including college choice factors and processes for student-athletes. Due to their

significance in this study with regard to the college recruitment and enrollment process for

prospective Division III athletes, this study also reviewed NCAA information and general

admission recruitment information. Within Chapter 3, I focus on Perna's (2006) conceptual

model, along with other work done regarding college choice and my constructivist paradigm that

influenced this study through my methodology and the research process.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

College student choice has received additional attention over the past 40 years due to the nature of competition among schools for new students, and it has been explored through both qualitative and quantitative studies. Despite the variety of studies that exist on general college search, much of the research on student-athlete college choice has utilized survey research through quantitative methods. Hearing from current students about the factors that influenced their college choice provides valuable information related to their decisions. However, a lack of qualitative research on student-athlete college choice leaves a gap in the literature for these students to tell their stories about their searches and how each of the various factors that are included on the surveys played a role in their decision-making. Having conversations and allowing students to share their stories may also add new factors to the conversation on college-choice for student-athletes that have been absent from prominent surveys on the topic (Lim et al., 2017).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is often focused on discovering how people make meaning of their experiences through description and words rather than numerical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). "The [qualitative] data is descriptive of social relationships and interchanges which unfold in the succession of actions and events in which the actors are engaged" (Dey, 1993, p. 37). Qualitative data can provide a rich and thorough explanation of events or occurrences that the researcher is looking to explain within their research (Miles et al., 2014). As researchers engage in qualitative research, they want to better understand the meanings that people (their

participants) place on actions and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Overall, four key characteristics of qualitative research are a focus on meaning and understanding, the researcher is a primary instrument for data collection, the process is inductive, and the results produce rich descriptions (Merriam, 2009). This study encompassed these four characteristics as a basic interpretive qualitative study.

I believe that each person's perception is their reality and they construct that reality through their beliefs and experiences. This belief aligns with the constructivist paradigm within qualitative research. "A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct their reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructionism thus underlies what I am calling basic [interpretive] qualitative study" (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). Constructionists believe that a single reality does not exist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Constructionists also see the impact of human interactions on their environment and the realities of that environment (Loseke, 2017).

> What constructionist philosophy does is redirect our attention to what is distinctly human. This reduces the importance of physical realities, challenges the factual nature of these realities, and questions the possibility that these realities can be correctly measured through the senses. (Loseke, 2017, p. 28)

This study focused on the student experience and how they make meaning throughout their college searches and come to decisions on where to attend college; the construction of their reality is the driving force behind this research.

While my research provided insights into the factors a student-athlete makes when choosing a Division III institution, it also gave a glimpse into the entire experiences and thoughts each student had throughout the process. As a qualitative study, students were able to share their experiences and how they internalized and felt about the information they received and the

interactions they had. Additionally, I utilized an in-depth focus group following my individual interviews, which provided further insight into the type of recruitment processes and activities these students went through with the coaches who have been recruiting them at the Division III level.

Research Questions

My research questions were developed to gain a better understanding of how students experience and make meaning of their college searches, and what factors are considered as they make their college decisions. "College enrollment decisions reflect an individual's 'situated context'" (Perna, 2006, p. 116). These research questions aligned with gaining a better understanding of the students situated context and how that context ultimately impacts their college choice.

1. How do prospective student-athletes at Division III institutions describe their recruitment process?

2. How do prospective Division III student-athletes perceive the influence of college choice factors during their college choice?

3. How do Division III student-athletes perceive the role of their parents/guardians throughout their college search?

Participant Recruitment

My focus on this study was to have multiple participants who allowed me to learn about their experiences and thoughts during their college searches. To access students to participate in the study, I utilized connections that I have cultivated both professionally and personally to initiate conversations with students who may have been eligible to participate. One group of people I utilized to connect with potential participants were high school counselors. In my initial

outreach to counselors I have worked with over the years, several indicated that I would be more successful working with coaches and athletic directors. I was given feedback that coach contact information was often located on a school's public athletic website, so I utilized that information to contact coaches and athletic directors.

After contacting coaches and athletic directors, several responded and indicated they had sent my email along, with a letter specifically for students with information about the study, to some of their students who were being recruited for Division III athletics. Of the students who received information from a school administrator, 12 completed the demographic survey for my study to indicate an interest in participating. Six males and six females completed this form, while 11 indicated they were not Hispanic or Latino and one indicated they were Hispanic. The sports that students were being recruited for included football, lacrosse, softball, bowling, volleyball, and track & field.

I emailed each student who completed the demographic survey to provide additional information about the study, along with the consent form to be completed and signed by them and a parent (if under 18). The students and their parents were made aware of the research questions I would examine throughout the study, along with the research methods I would utilize to collect the data. Additionally, each student was made aware of the requirements expected of participants in the study. Since I did not ask their ages on the demographic survey, I was unable to tell if they were under 18, so for all students I worked through the appropriate IRB channels to obtain student and parent or guardian permission for each student to be involved, along with their own consent to participate as the parent or guardian of a prospective student-athlete. I offered to have an additional phone conversation with each student and their parent/guardian, but none of the students decided to have the additional conversation.

Once each student was presented with the basic elements of the study and stated their interest in participating, I made sure they understood the informed consent agreement included with the information. Due to COVID-19, three students indicated they did not have access to print and return the attached consent form, so I copied the document into an electronic consent form through Qualtrics. An accurate and thorough consent agreement with participants allows them to have a greater understanding of their commitment, while also setting expectations for the process at the onset of the project (Miles et al., 2014). Given the commitments required for the study to be conducted during their senior year, it was important for them to understand and agree to the time commitment required for their participation. Participation in research studies should be voluntary and free from penalty, should they refuse to participate. My consent form went into detail about the voluntary nature of their participation, also noting they may opt out of their involvement at any point during the study.

Due to the nature of this research, the participants in the study represented a purposeful sample. By utilizing a purposeful sample, a researcher can include participants who can best provide the information and data that is being explored (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I selected students who were conducting a wide-spread college search and had been actively recruited by Division III coaches throughout their college search. I also worked to ensure there was diversity among my participants, with a specific focus on gender and race. Three of my participants were White females, one was a White male, and the other was a Hispanic male. Two of my participants were being recruited for football, one was being recruited for lacrosse, one was being recruited for volleyball, and one was being recruited for softball. With only a few participants it was not possible, or intended, to have participants representative of all prospective student-athletes from all sports.

Positionality

As a researcher, it is important to recognize how my own experiences and beliefs influenced my study and how I interpreted the data collected. When considering the biases a researcher brings into their work, it is important to consider both who they are and their relationship with participants (Donnelly, class handout, 2018). Bias is something that cannot be eliminated from a study, but the researcher should be open about their biases throughout the study so they can be acknowledged and recognized (Norris, 1997). In addition to acknowledging the biases that a researcher may bring to their research, it is also important that the researcher "monitor them [biases] as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). My experiences and knowledge have influenced my decisions throughout this study, from the selection of the topic through my research questions, and how I structured the interview guide for my semi-structured interviews and focus group. Qualitative research relies on the researcher to utilize past experiences in the interpretation of their research (Patton, 2015). My previous roles and experiences within college admissions and working with prospective Division III student-athletes also influences how I interpreted the information they shared about their college search processes.

Understanding the role and context of the researcher is important within qualitative research, as they are the instrument for data collection (Bourke, 2014). Within the context of this study, I was an insider in the world of college admissions, but an outsider in the realm of college athletics. Biases may lead to leading questions during interview processes that aim to steer the conversation in a specific direction based on where the interviewer wants to take it (Merriam, 2009). As I established my interview and focus group guides, I gave special attention to avoiding leading questions. One way to provide a check on this language was to ask two other

professionals within college enrollment at various stages of their careers to examine my interview guides and provide feedback on any potential issues with leading or clarity of intent. My role as Director of Admission at a Division III institution provided credibility when contacting students to participate in the study, but it also may have caused concern or hesitation among coaches and school administrators who were working with each of these students throughout their recruitment processes.

As the Director of Admission at a Division III institution, I have developed close, collaborative professional relationships with coaches across our athletic teams. Additionally, when recruiting, admitting, and enrolling students at an institution where roughly a third of the student population is a varsity athlete, I work with prospective student-athletes daily. My interactions with coaches and prospective student-athletes provided insight into their recruitment and enrollment processes, but from an institutional perspective. Additionally, my institution of employment at the time of this study does not require that athletics report under the enrollment division, so there were strategic decisions and recruitment efforts taking place that I was unaware of on a micro-level with each individual student by coaches and other athletic administrators.

Additionally, within my role as the Director of Admission at a Division III institution, I have direct experience working with prospective student-athletes throughout their college searches. In this capacity, I have worked alongside coaches as they have strategized and implemented recruitment plans for their upcoming recruiting classes. My experiences with college recruitment and Division III student-athletes helped me understand the higher education context these students were exploring throughout their searches. While these experiences were useful in helping me gain access to information and people throughout my study, it was important for me that I ensured I was accurately portraying the thoughts and experiences of the

students with whom I worked. During my conversations with each of the participants prior to the study, I informed them of my current role in college admissions, but I made clear that I was looking for honesty and transparency about their thoughts and experiences during their college searches, even if that included some negative or critical feedback about standard college admission practices.

My positionality was also influenced by my status as an avid college sports fan. Within my role as the Director of Admission, I make it a priority to attend at least one game/match/meet for all our 24 athletic teams each season. While I do not have a thorough understanding of the rules and regulations for all 24 sports that we offer, I do have a solid foundation of knowledge about the sports we have on our campus. Even though I did not play any sports at the collegiate level, I did play several sports growing up and throughout high school. From my experiences within an admission office, I have also seen coaches work hard to determine how they can effectively recruit for their sports. As I recruited participants for this study and developed a relationship with each of them, it was important for me to establish trust; my knowledge of their sport and ability to have conversations with them about the things that excited them helped to establish that trust.

Being a relatively young, White, heterosexual male also influenced how I was perceived by participants throughout the study, along with the perceptions I had throughout the data collection and analysis. When a researcher has dominant identities, it is important to establish trust with research participants (Bourke, 2014). Developing trust is important, but it looks different depending on each participant. To not influence or bias the participants, it was important for me to set a standard from the beginning of my interactions with them that I was not working with them in any capacity for my admissions role. While I could not eliminate my

position, I was very clear that our conversations were confidential and had no impact on any of the schools they were considering. A researcher will negotiate access to the participants throughout the research process, not just at the onset of the study (Burgess, 1991). I spent time talking with each student during their recruitment to the study attempting to get to know them. This was intended to help ensure the trust was established at the beginning of the project and could be maintained throughout the entirety of the study.

I also practiced reflexivity throughout this research study. Being reflexive throughout the research process involves examining and questioning the research, processes, and decisions made as a researcher throughout the process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Similarly, "through constantly reflective on, questioning and evaluating the research process, the researcher attempts to distinguish how subjective and inter-subjective elements have impinged on (and possibly transformed) both the data collection and analysis" (Finlay, 1998, p. 453). My reflection allowed me to understand my role and the impact of my role throughout the research. I practiced reflection throughout this study in two specific ways: firstly, through the establishment and maintenance of a research journal and, secondarily, through conversations with two colleagues to ensure I was staying grounded throughout the process. Both practices allowed me to reflect on behaviors and thoughts throughout the study, but also enabled me to ensure I was aware of the impact of my biases and positionality throughout my analysis of data.

Researcher Reflections

As I embarked on this research study to explore the recruitment and enrollment process for prospective Division III student-athletes, I was eager to engage in a year-long case study to do an in-depth analysis of a few students throughout their senior years. Due to safety concerns and pandemic fatigue from the various COVID-19 regulations in place for students within K–12

education, I was unable to find any students who were interested in having me accompany them for their college exploration journeys throughout the duration of their senior years. Restrictions put in place by colleges would have also limited my ability to physically travel to campuses to attend campus visits for each student.

I was able to restructure my study and utilize a basic interpretive qualitative study approach. This experience allowed me to connect with five students who provided a glimpse into their experiences as they talked freely and openly about their experiences as prospective Division III athletes, which factors were important to them during their college searches, and the roles of their parents throughout their searches. These conversations highlighted how thoughtful these students were beyond just the scope of considering their future athletic careers. For Division III students, the athletic experience is something they undertake because they find meaning in it; they want four more years to suit up and play the sport they love. Despite loving the sport, they recognize the potential limitations it may have, as well. The students spoke about potential long-term effects of injuries or not being able to focus on their academics enough to be successful within a more challenging major. The students demonstrated love for their sports, but also a strong understanding that the sports were for the next four years—compared to their professional lives, which would last the next 40+ years.

As I spoke with the students, each demonstrated a balance of finding a place where they could continue to play their sport with an institution that set them up for a successful career. The students were not always standout athletes who were groomed from a young age to be collegiate superstars. Rather, they were students who worked hard and put in the time and effort throughout high school to continue to improve in their sports. When the students began hearing from college coaches, they each felt an immense sense of pride for the opportunity to play their sport while in

college. I asked each student to tell me their favorite part of the college search and each had an excited energy as they spoke to a specific moment in their search. For each student, that moment came at a time when they felt proud of themselves.

<div align="center">**Data Collection**</div>

Within this basic interpretive qualitative study, I utilized several methods of data collection to gain access to the thoughts and experiences of prospective student-athletes throughout their college searches. The methods of data collection implemented during this study were interviews and a follow-up focus group. When multiple sources of data are utilized during a study, triangulation occurs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Triangulation can help the researcher gain a more broad and thorough understanding of the topic being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The data collection methods selected for this study allowed me to hear individually from each student during an interview and then utilize the information gained and assessed at that level to explore their college searches further during the focus group.

Interviews

Interviews are a great source of in-depth information from participants within a study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In addition to gaining in-depth information, interviews are also able to provide rich historical information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews are helpful in providing specific information from the participant about their thoughts and actions (Yin, 2014). Each participant for this study sat down with me for 45 to 60 minutes to have an interview over the phone. During each interview, the students discussed their college search processes, the factors they considered important as they narrowed their college options, and the role various people played during their college searches, including parents and coaches.

The interviews that took place with students were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews fall in the middle of the continuum of interview structure that a researcher can utilize; this method utilized both structured questions and the opportunity to ask less structured question based on the conversation (Merriam, 2009). Also,

> Compared to structured interviews, semi structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee, and the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide.
>
> (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 579)

Qualitative researchers often utilize a semi-structured approach because it allows for the participants to have more control to define and explain their circumstances and beliefs while the researcher can adjust and adapt to what responses are provided (Merriam, 2009). The semi-structured interviews allowed me to have some questions pre-determined, while also allowing for the conversation to unfold naturally as we talked about the student's college searches. The interview guide allowed for some consistency among the information students shared that related to their searches, but the flexibility of this approach allowed for them to focus on the aspects of their college searches that have been most important to them.

The format and questions of a semi-structured interview are contained within the interview protocol (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). My interview protocol (Appendix B) was structured with both main questions and follow-up questions designed to provide insight and information related to my main research questions. Main questions within an interview help provide structure and ensure research questions are being answered (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In

addition to incorporating main questions, interviews should also include follow-up and probing questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012); my interviews included both structured and unstructured follow-up and probing questions. Throughout interviews, the researcher should refrain from inserting too much of their own voice into the conversation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Given my role within the field and various identities previously mentioned, it was important for me to ask questions and ensure the participants had clarity on what was being asked, but that I did not spend too much time affirming or questioning their responses or inserting too much of my own thoughts or experiences into the conversation.

One way to ensure my role in admissions was not counterproductive to the research was to ensure part of my interview guide stated that the conversation was intended to learn about their college search, and interpretation of it, not for me to provide insight, feedback, or guidance. I also worked to ensure the interview guide and questions were set up to align with that statement. Interviews are intended to be efficient tools to gain access to information desired (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I arranged the questions for my interviews efficiently to avoid questions that fell outside of the scope of the study or were leading in nature.

Interviews can be conducted in person or through electronic formats (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The original intent of this study was to conduct each interview with the participants in person. However, COVID-19 prevented these interviews from being conducted in person. Instead of conducting each interview in person, these interviews were held over the phone. Students were given the option to join a Zoom session or participate over the phone and each of the participants elected to have their interviews through a phone conversation.

Focus Group

In addition to conducting individual interviews with each of my participants, I also conducted a focus group to allow participants to engage in a more significant way with our conversation by having this conversation with other students who were also going through their college searches. In a focus group, several people are interviewed at the same time with the ability to interact and make sense of the prompts and questions from the moderator within a group setting (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Given their group format, researchers can produce large amounts of data in a shorter time period, which provides a breadth of information related to the topic being studied (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Focus groups also allow the researcher to evaluate the group dynamics as they explore how the participants interact with each other throughout the group interview (Smithson, 2000; Wibeck & Dahlgren, 2007). The focus group conversation allowed me to witness how the students interacted with each other throughout the interview and to see how they utilized the ideas and thoughts of the other participants to build or expand upon the conversation.

The focus group was used as a follow-up conversation from my initial interviews with each participant.

It is appropriate to follow up in-depth interviews with focus group interviews to verify individual interview data, examine how individual responses differ in a group setting, expose individual interviewees to the group dynamic as a means of education or empowerment, and to include larger populations that may not have been available for in-depth interviews. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 211)

Within my focus group, the intent was to verify the information learned through my individual interviews, examine responses in a different context, and expose the participants to the group

dynamic. I was also able to use prompts for the focus group participants that provided more concrete examples to their descriptions of communications received from colleges during their college searches.

The content of the focus group is important, but the researcher should also consider the group dynamics that play out throughout the group interview process. Specifically, focus groups may have a few potential limitations with voices who are too strong and dominate the conversation, a lack of comfort by participants in speaking views or opinions that differ from the majority, and potential power dynamics (Smithson, 2000; Wibeck & Dahlgren, 2007). Rather than simply acknowledging these potential dynamics within a focus group, the researcher should develop and implement specific strategies to track and analyze the group dynamics throughout the conversation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Throughout my focus group conversation, I tracked elements related to speaking time and prominence while also making note of any potential areas where group think seemed to be overriding any of the participants willingness to state a varying opinion.

While analyzing the conversations throughout the focus group, I also served as the moderator. "The moderator greatly influences the flow of the conversation and thus the group dynamic and manner of the group narrative" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 216). Hesse-Biber and Leavy also suggested that an interview guide should be created for a focus group, with the level of detail and specificity dependent upon how flexible the researcher plans to be with the flow of the conversation. Within my focus group, I wanted to provide the students with the ability to take a general question and take it in the direction that was appropriate within the context of their college searches. My interview guide for the focus group was broad to allow for participants to tell their stories and provide me with as much information as they could about

how they would describe their own experiences without the influence of my questions that could

have led them down a different direction that may have not been as important to them.

Data Analysis

"Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data" (Merriam, 2009, p. 175).

The data collection process for this study occurred through interviews and a focus group with

participants. Instead of analyzing the data after the completion of all interviews and focus group,

I spent time listening to the recordings and reading transcriptions of the interviews throughout

the process. Data analysis and collection that occur simultaneously help the researcher assess the

strength of the data to ensure they are getting the best data possible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018;

Dey, 1993; Miles et al., 2014). Information gained throughout the data collection process should

be evaluated and utilized to help inform and direct the next steps in the data collection process

(Merriam, 2009). As I collected data through the processes described above, I analyzed the

information to determine what additional information was needed to better understand the

process and the students' thoughts as they aligned with my research questions. Specifically, the

information gained from the interviews allowed me to structure the focus group in a meaningful

way related to the research questions and how the students were making meaning throughout

their college searches.

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to explore the recruitment and

enrollment process for Division III athletic recruits during their senior year of high school. An

inductive approach was taken for this study, which focuses on building patterns and themes

throughout the process; deductive reasoning was also useful as it helps researchers understand if

they have met the threshold of data to accurately support each theme (Creswell & Creswell,

2018). "Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between

concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between

description and interpretation" (Merriam, 2009, p 176). My utilization of both inductive and

deductive approaches allowed me to best utilize the information provided by the students to

direct the data collection moving forward and interpret and analyze the findings.

Data analysis occurring at the same time as data collection establishes the researcher as a

participant of the research, so the field notes and other writings throughout the process can be

important to consider while conducting one's analysis (Dey, 1993). As I conducted my data

analysis, it was important to utilize classifications when considering the choice factors,

influences, and thoughts that a student experienced during their college search. Classifications

allow researchers to have a broad understanding of the data and to draw comparisons among

items within the data (Dey, 1993). The classifications for this study aligned information gained

from each student in the study within one of the layers of Perna's (2006) conceptual model:

social, economic, and policy context; higher education context; school and community context;

or their individual habitus. When data are classified, it also allows the researcher to focus on

relevant information; when too much time is spent on irrelevant information or data, the results

can be counterproductive (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

Classifying the data according to Perna's (2006) conceptual model allowed me to

specifically frame and segment the information the students provided. As I examined the

information through the lens of Pena's model, I was able to construct meaningful categories to

best address the research questions posed within this study. As I analyzed the information

presented by the students, I wanted to ensure I reached a point in which there was data

saturation. Data saturation occurs when the information gained through the research is not

providing any new understandings or meanings from the participant experiences (Merriam,

2009). As I collected and analyzed information, I was able to reach a point of saturation after conducting five interviews; the focus group conversation helped to verify saturation.

Coding

A common classification method that was utilized throughout this study was coding; this occurred for the interviews and the focus group conversation. I utilized various coding methods during this study depending on the content that was being coded: descriptive and in vivo coding for interviews, process coding for campus visit observations, and emotion and values coding for journal entries. Utilizing different coding methods within a study is appropriate for qualitative research (Miles et al., 2014). Within a descriptive code, the researcher is looking to provide a word or short statement that describes what is being discussed within the passage, whereas in vivo codes are taking directly from the words of the participants (Miles et al., 2014). Process coding focuses explicitly on action items within the data (Miles et al., 2014), which is useful when exploring the actions and interactions during campus visits. Emotion coding seeks to capture the emotions of the participants, and value coding highlights the values, attitudes, and beliefs of participants (Miles et al., 2014).

Transcripts were transcribed by a third-party transcription company. Once each transcription came back, I read along with the audio of the interviews to ensure accuracy and to add any notes or memos throughout the interviews. In addition to listening to the audio of the interviews and focus group along with the transcripts, I listened to each recording two additional times. The coding process that I utilized for the interview and focus group transcripts was completed through analytic induction. Analytic induction is an analysis approach specifically for qualitative research when the analysis seeks to gain greater confirmation of theories based on qualitative research (Patton, 2015). Within this approach, deductive coding is used for theory

confirmation, but inductive coding is also utilized to identify any new or emergent concepts or ideas (Patton, 2015).

Through analytic induction, coding took place to find alignment with Perna's (2006) conceptual model. Once all initial codes were established, *pattern codes* were created; these codes identify larger themes within the codes that were initially seen within the data (Miles et al., 2014). The pattern codes established during this process were family support, initial college aspirations, accessing college information, college choice factors, high school support, school outreach methods, proximity to home, athletics versus academics, the impact of COVID-19, and the Division III commitment process. These pattern codes were first identified and established using the content from the interviews and focus group, and they were then examined through the lenses of the four layers of Perna's (2006) conceptual model. These codes were established, monitored, and updated through the use of excel spreadsheets that were kept on a password secured drive on my computer.

Analytic Memos

In addition to codes that were established throughout the data collection and analysis process, analytic memos were also utilized to assist in organizing my thoughts on the data. Analytic memos "tie together different pieces of data into a recognizable cluster, often to show that those data are instances of a general concept . . . they are one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hand" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 96). The analytic memos that I created throughout the research process aimed to provide context to the data collected and helped me understand how I perceived the information presented by the students as they were going through their college searches. These memos were written by hand in a journal that was kept secure, and entries were written after each interview and focus group conversation. Six specific

analytic memos were drafted after these conversations, along with additional entries as throughout the rest of the analysis process. I also maintained notes within the journal as I was listening and re-listening to the audio from my interactions with participants. These journals were not coded for data.

Trustworthiness

When examining trustworthiness, it is important to consider both the reliability and validity of the research that is being conducted. Issues surrounding reliability in qualitative studies relate to the consistency and stability of information and processes (Miles et al., 2014). Questions about reliability may come into play when biases are examined for the researcher, which are present for anyone conducting research. Maxwell (2008) stated,

> In qualitative research, the main concern is not with eliminating variance between researchers in the values and expectations that they bring to the study but with understanding how a particular researcher's values influence the conduct and conclusions of the study. (p. 243)

Similarly, the role of the researcher should be acknowledged and understood throughout qualitative research (Maxwell, 2008). Understanding my biases coming from the admission office was important for me throughout this research process.

One way to increase reliability within a qualitative research project is to be clear and concise when outlining the research process and questions to ensure alignment (Miles et al., 2014). The alignment of research questions and processes was done thorough talking through the process with two colleagues in the industry. Additionally, utilizing peer reviews can prove useful in improving reliability within these studies (Miles et al., 2014). I conducted peer reviews throughout my research process, in terms of both clarity of information presented within the

organization and dissemination of information, and in the questions being asked of prospective student-athletes throughout the process. I identified and utilized two colleagues within the enrollment industry who have experience working in admission offices at Division III institutions: one at an entry-level position and another in a leadership role. Access to other admission professionals gave me a space to talk through my research ideas and discern any potential limitations or barriers, while also ensuring I was asking the right questions of the right people. I spoke with these two colleagues as I developed questions to ensure that the questions were not leading or demonstrating any bias, after my initial interviews to talk through some of the general themes that were emerging, and after the final themes and analysis had been conducted; these conversations were not formal. Some revisions were made to the initial questions upon their feedback and I was also able to take their feedback on emerging themes to enhance the interview guide for my focus group. They also indicated that the overall analysis and findings produced results that they would find useful in recruiting prospective student athletes. Confidentiality was maintained throughout each of these conversations with colleagues.

Validity is more contentious within the literature on qualitative studies, yet still is a perceived indicator of rigor within this type of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). I worked throughout this study to increase validity of the research and information collected. Validity can be determined within a qualitative study when people believe the results that have been found (Miles et al., 2014). Within qualitative research, the concept of validity as viewed through quantitative research is not appropriate; however, when applied correctly validity has a place within qualitative research (Norris, 1997). "Validity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation, and whether or not a given explanation fits a given description" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 50). Similarly, a way to improve validity in qualitative

research is to gather and utilize rich data from participants in a study (Maxwell, 2008). One way

that validity can be improved within qualitative research is through triangulation, when various

methods are used to collect information around a single topic (Miles et al., 2014). Throughout

this research process, I utilized multiple sources of data collection, including verifying initial

analysis of interviews through the focus group and utilizing rich data by giving the participant

voices a platform to support the findings in this study.

With debate over validity within qualitative research, a different approach has been to

view validity as authenticity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Having authenticity is a hallmark of a

constructivist inquiry, with a specific focus on ensuring fairness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

"Fairness was thought to be a quality of balance; that is all stakeholder views, perspectives,

values, claims, concerns and voices should be apparent in the text. Omission of stakeholder or

participant voices reflects, we believe, a form of bias" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 140).

Fairness was at the forefront of my mind as I ensured each participant could have a voice and

share their experiences, and their interpretation and construction of those experiences.

Delimitations

It is important to recognize that both limitations and delimitations existed within this

study.

Delimitations are the boundaries of research as it is being proposed and include such

information as the "case" being investigated and a brief description of its characteristics.

Limitations are factors that may affect the results of the study and that are generally

beyond the control of the researcher. (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 77)

This basic interpretive study explored the recruitment and enrollment process for Division III

athletic recruits during their senior years of high school. When I had conversations with these

students, they were halfway through their senior years, though they all spoke about the volume of their interactions with colleges and universities over the past several years. Some of these experiences and interactions with colleges recruiting them may not have been remembered or at the front of their minds during our conversation because of how long ago they occurred, despite the impact they may have on the students' recruitment and enrollment processes. Additionally, COVID-19 put restrictions on my ability to access students during this process to gain a firsthand perspective of their college searches. Additionally, a delimitation of this research was the lack of input on the experience from the institutional and coaching perspective. This delimitation was appropriate for this study because the goal of this research was to understand the recruitment and enrollment experiences from the student and parent perspectives.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I provided information on my research on the recruitment and enrollment process for prospective Division III student-athletes. My study took on a basic interpretive approach as I looked to gain insight on the recruitment and enrollment process for five different students. My data collection methods included interviews and a follow-up focus group conversation. A variety of coding methods were used to analyze each of the conversations, with a specific focus on using Perna's College Choice Model as a lens. I also highlighted information related to my positionality and the potential implications that could have on my research as I strove to maintain an authentic glimpse into this process for the student participants. Throughout the entire research process, I remained grounded by the constructionist paradigm and Perna's (2006) conceptual model.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to explore the recruitment and enrollment process for Division III athletic recruits. During this study, the recruitment and enrollment process was defined as the interactions between prospective student-athletes and college or university faculty, staff, administrators, and current students during their recruitment processes. Specifically, this study focused on three research questions that I worked to gain insights into through individual interviews and a focus group conversation with participants. The three research questions for this study evolved during the conversations with my participants as I learned more about their experiences and how they made meaning of those experiences throughout their college searches. The research questions for my study were:

1. How do prospective student-athletes at Division III institutions describe their recruitment process?

2. How do prospective Division III student-athletes perceive the influence of college choice factors during their college choice?

3. How do Division III student-athletes perceive the role of their parents/guardians throughout their college search?

Within this chapter, I expand upon the information I learned about the thoughts and experiences of my participants throughout my interviews and focus group conversations. In order to provide structure, the format of the information presented utilizes Perna's conceptual model on college choice to organize the students' recruitment experiences. The summary section of this chapter provides an overview of the findings for each specific research question.

Overview of Participants' College Choices

The participants in my research study were all high school seniors currently navigating their college searches. Each of the participants considered a variety of colleges and universities throughout their college searches; some schools were strictly for academics, while other options were for them to attend as a student-athlete. Despite some variance within the group's college search process, they all shared a common thread of experiences in being recruited to play a Division III sport in college. Within this section, I provide information on each participant's college search process.

Participant 1: Johnnie

Johnnie was a senior at a Division II high school in northern Ohio. As Johnnie explored his college options, he was committed to finding a school that offered him an exceptional education for engineering. Johnnie talked with coaches at Division III institutions for several years throughout high school to continue his athletic career to play football, but he was not fully committed to playing football in college. Within his college choice set, Johnnie considered one school where he would play college football and two other schools where he believed he would get a strong education but would not be able to play football. Both schools he focused on for a strong engineering education were Division I schools and he would not be a student-athlete at either. Throughout his college search, Johnnie focused on finding the right fit for himself academically, while also entertaining the opportunity to play football at a Division III school.

Participant 2: Doug

Doug played football at the same Division II high school as Johnnie. After only a few games during his senior year, Doug sustained an injury that prevented him from playing throughout the remainder of his senior season. While Doug was not fully committed to

continuing his football career in college, he was intrigued by the idea that he would be able to get back onto the football field after an injury that made him question whether he would ever play again. Doug considered several schools, and some of them were Division III schools where he could play football, though he did have one option for a larger school where he would not be a student-athlete.

Participant 3: Emily

Emily attended a small high school in northeast Ohio and played Division IV softball there. During her freshman year of high school, Emily attended a softball camp where she found the school that would eventually be the top choice throughout her college search. Initially, Emily considered just this one school and had no desire to consider, visit, or apply to other schools. After a conversation with her parents, she decided to expand her search and consider other Division III institutions. Throughout her college search and exploring several other institutions, her initial aspirant institution remained at the top of her list during our conversations for this study.

Participant 4: Becky

Becky was a senior at a large Division I high school in northeast Ohio. Becky spent a lot of her time preparing to be a collegiate athlete after graduation. For several years, she participated on a traveling volleyball team with a head coach who had a reputation for helping young players develop into collegiate athletes. Throughout her high school career, Becky received interest from coaches at a variety of NCAA Division III schools, along with at least one Division I coach, who she said approached her to consider their institution. Becky had a friend who attended a Division III school for volleyball and this friend was instrumental in Becky's

college search, helping her decide on her top choice institution. Despite some early consideration

of different schools, Becky only applied to one school.

Participant 5: Gina

Gina attended a high school in northeast Ohio where she participated in lacrosse for their

Division II program. Growing up, Gina participated mostly in softball and basketball, and never

saw herself as a collegiate athlete. Once Gina began playing lacrosse in eighth grade, however,

she began to think she had an opportunity to play in college. When COVID-19 hit, Gina lost her

junior lacrosse season and, in order to allow coaches to see her play, she played on a traveling

team for the first time. Her coach was a Division III collegiate coach, so she helped her connect

with other Division III coaches at schools that offered her desired major. Having considered both

Division III and Division II schools for her college options, Gina had largely settled on her top

choice during the time period of this study—a Division III institution— but she had not officially

committed to the school.

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Perna's Conceptual Choice Model (2006)

</div>

In 2006, Perna developed a model on college choice that expanded upon previous

research by Chapman (1981) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987). This model has been utilized to

specifically focus on the college search process for prospective students within various student

populations, but never with a specific focus on prospective Division III student-athletes. As I

spoke with each of the students within this study and analyzed the information they presented, I

utilized Perna's model as the framework to organize and make meaning of all the information. In

order to best portray the information that the students shared, I highlighted the findings through

the lens of Perna's (2006) conceptual model on college choice. Each layer is described prior to

highlighting key themes that emerged from the research that relate to the context of each specific layer within the model.

Layer One: Habitus

As students talked through their college searches with me during their interviews, it was clear that their individual habitus influenced how each of the college searches began and how they evolved throughout the course of the search process. Some of the aspects of their individual habitus were not discussed explicitly within our conversations but were more components of who they were as they progressed through their searches. Each of these students was a high school athlete hoping to play college athletics at the Division III level, and that characteristic of their habitus alone fundamentally helped shape the processes they went through while exploring colleges. While this was a common trait among participants, they were diverse in gender and race. I interviewed three women and two men; four were White and one was non-White. These characteristics also helped shape their college searches at a foundational level outside of the scope of our conversations. During our discussions, the support they received throughout their college searches and the value placed on higher education that was demonstrated through their initial college aspirations emerged as two key elements to their college searches.

Initial College Aspirations

As the students within this study spoke about their initial college aspirations, several ideas permeated the conversations, allowing me to understand the significance of the individual habitus on the thoughts and actions of the students. The students demonstrated a sense of social and cultural capital that allowed them to think about college early in their high school careers, even if those initial thoughts lacked depth or true knowledge about the process. Students utilized social capital to inform their early aspirations as they considered the expected costs versus

benefits of going to college. The level of capital each student in this study had was varied, even from the onset, as some prepared to be first-generation college students and others were able to rely on the college experiences and knowledge of their parents.

Each of the students in this study described their initial college aspirations, and the reasons for those aspirations, differently. However, they all thought more seriously about college early in their high school careers. As the students started thinking about college, they were not focused on the athletic experiences in college, but were more focused on the overall experience. Doug described the information he learned from his parents as an important role in shaping his initial thoughts on college.

> I first knew why I wanted to go to college when my mom and my dad encouraged me by saying that college is basically the best four years of your life. And you're going to meet so many new people. You're going to have so many more friends, I guess. And then, of course, it sets you up for your future. So, college is a big need in my household.

Similarly, Johnnie described the influence of an institution's national reputation on his initial college thoughts, rather than specifically focusing on his own goals and objectives for attending college.

> Yeah, I think my first time I ever thought about it was probably sophomore year of high school. I was just sitting in my room and my room's decorated with Ohio State. I love its football and all that, but I just really wanted to go to a large state school, but I had no like actual knowledge of what the school is like, what I would like in a school, but I kind of liked the name. And I think I've started to get away from that, like actually researching about schools and figuring out what they are like and how and if I would actually enjoy going there.

As the students started focusing on attending college after high school, they were unsure on the processes and specific information they knew (or needed to know) about college enrollment, but they were able to move from initial aspirations to focusing more on what they would want out of a college.

Once the students began looking into college, they started to think more seriously about being a student-athlete in college. The students did not grow up thinking they were destined for college athletic opportunities, but instead felt the opportunities start to arise as they were exploring their college options. For example, Gina shared,

> At one point I just had no dream of going to college for playing sports. I played basketball and softball. So obviously a girl that's five-foot-two is not going anywhere for basketball. And for softball, I was decent, but I wasn't college material. So, whenever I started playing lacrosse in eighth grade, I really got into it, but I still wasn't really college material yet. And then over the summer I played a travel team, because last year our season got canceled because of COVID. I started playing with a travel team over the summer, and I really realized that I don't want this season to be my last season I ever play the sport.

The students also received helpful initial guidance from their high school or travel team coaches as they started to consider, or be recruited for, college athletics. Becky shared that she likely would not have known how to go through the process without the help of her travel coach. "But I was kind of clueless on the whole process. So, my coach had us all . . . all my teammates made up pre-ready-to-go recruiting forms that you handed out to people at tournaments and stuff." Each of the participants in this study indicated they began to see themselves as more of a college

athlete and to consider athletic opportunities as they started to hear more from college coaches. Johnnie described how his initial college athletic aspirations began by saying,

> I think the opportunity came to me more than I came to it. I started as a tight end in my junior year and my senior year, but at the end of my junior year, over the summer, a lot of schools started reaching out to me and I started getting a lot of decent interest. So, I just started talking to them to keep all my doors open. And then I realized that that probably wouldn't be a bad idea to play a sport in college . . . it'd give me something to do. I'll get to meet a lot of people and it'd keep me out of trouble if I were to get in any, I doubt it, but . . . I don't know. I feel like it would just be a good opportunity and it could help to push me into other things too, but I don't know if I need that.

As the students went through their college searches and interacted with more coaches through camps and other recruitment activities, they began to gain increased confidence that they would play at the collegiate level, which Emily described specifically by saying, "I practiced like five days a week hitting in the cage, going to other colleges' camps. They offered me positions, so I knew I could do it. And I just kept working hard every day." Despite not knowing where they would go to college, or ultimately if they would play a sport in college, the students determined that it would be one of the factors they considered as they explored their options.

Family Support

Throughout our conversations, the participants each shared a variety of people within their families who provided support, feedback, and guidance on their college searches. Parental and family involvement in a student's college choice is an example of social capital (Perna, 2006). Gina was the youngest sibling and watched her older brothers go to college at one

institution, and she specifically recalled a conversation with one of her brothers where he gave her feedback that was instrumental in helping her feel less pressure to follow in their footsteps.

> So, unlike them, I kinda wanted to stay on campus. And I also got to see how they handled college and the things that they wish they did different. My brother kinda told me don't go to this place just because everybody goes to this place. So, don't go to the same school, obviously. That's one of the most popular ones around here. He's like, "Everyone goes and you don't get that, the student to faculty ratio at your top choice is a 12 to one." He's like, "You don't get that at the state schools where the class sizes are astronomical." He said, "Just go wherever you feel comfortable," basically.

While other family members came up in conversations, the family members who were a constant resource and support system for the students throughout their college searches were their parents.

> The parents of these students were involved in the college search process, showed some concerns for their child during the process, and were ultimately supportive and encouraging along the way. Johnnie shared that sentiment about his parents.

> They give me a lot of support, emotional and such, so I'm sure it'll come down to, once we get my decisions back, all of them, it will come down to seeing all the numbers and everything and I'm sure my parents will be right there with me.

The students considered their parents as partners throughout the process and looked to them to provide feedback and thoughts they had as the students explored their college options. Even when Emily described doing a lot of the outreach and communication with the coaches and other school officials herself, she still got feedback and help from her parents. "They helped me with creating my video, and they came along to the visits with me. And they helped by like, giving their opinion about what they thought and like where I'd fit best." Most of the feedback and

conversations were similar. However, the three female students indicated their parents had concerns or shared comments about safety, such as Gina's dad. "And then my dad was more worried about the culture side of it and how I was going to fit in and if it was safe." The two male students did not indicate that safety came up in the conversations they had with their parents.

The students also indicated they received input and feedback from their parents throughout their college searches. This feedback was varied in nature and related to several aspects of the college search. Emily specifically expressed that her parents encouraged her to apply and consider more than just one school to avoid "putting all of [her] eggs in one basket." Similarly, the students looked to their parents for feedback about the campus visits they attended. Becky described that her parents enjoyed their time on campus at her top choice institution.

> They loved it. They were like super impressed with the facilities and the buildings. It was
> like . . . One of the things that they said was that it was really clean, which I guess was
> kind of funny. But it was really clean. And they really just liked the coaches. They were
> personable with them. They actually ended up talking about more than just volleyball.
> And it was just a really welcoming feeling, I suppose.

The students did not have a formal mechanism for getting feedback from their parents about their campus visits, but all of them included their parents on their campus visits and got feedback from them about their thoughts.

Even though the students had involved parents who actively participated throughout their college searches, the students believed their parents would support whichever direction they decided to take with their college search. Despite this support, the parents were still providing

feedback, specifically as it related to financial aid. Johnnie shared an interaction with his parents where they discussed financial aid.

> Um, we talked a little last night because obviously we got thinking the school financial aid stuff. And so they don't want to see me go down in a ton of debt, which I understand. And we've been talking about that and then lately, they're kind of more like hands-off. I guess I would go as long as it's not somewhere that they know I'm going to hate, but the choice really is in my hands.

Along with the financial aid implications on his college choice, Doug also shared the holistic concern his parents had for his decision, though he believed he had their ultimate support.

> I would think how they would feel about, like you said, the head coach and basically, and also more importantly, how I would feel about the college. How it's going to affect me in my day-to-day life. My day-to-day mental health and stuff like that. So, they would be more concerned about how I feel about the school, rather than how they did.

Overall, the students felt empowered by their parents to analyze their college options and make the decisions they felt were best for themselves.

When asked if they would want the role of their parent to have been different throughout their searches, all the participants were quick to simply state "no," with Johnnie adding, "I feel like mine have been doing a good job. I don't know. I couldn't imagine wanting them to be less involved, but no, I think they're doing just fine."

The positive parental involvement from each of the participants' experiences was echoed as they talked, not only about their initial involvement in their searches, but across the entire process. Johnnie indicated about his parents that "they've been supportive through everything. And it's not like they are forcing me to pick a school. I haven't committed anywhere. But the

decision's all on my hands, which I think is nice." Doug agreed with Johnnie on the role of his parents and went into more detail on how they've helped through the process.

> My parents were pretty much like Johnnie. Freshman, sophomore year, they would every once in a while say, "Hey, you should think about college." I was like, "whatever." And then now, once senior year hit, and then I obviously got coaches' emails, and then I started looking into it. It's nice because they feel like wherever I go it's not a lose situation. Anywhere I go is not a bad choice, so I've been really grateful to have my parents just kind of join me for the ride. That's pretty much it.

Each of the students saw their parents as partners throughout their college search processes. As the conversations began to feel more real, with the cost of college coming up, the students saw their connection with their parents stay strong. As Becky described,

> They kind of let me have free reign of where I wanted to go. Obviously, tuition's a big deal, but they didn't make me worry about it or feel guilty if where I wanted to go was a little bit more expensive, which I was originally planning for.

The students expressed gratitude and appreciation that their parents were able to support them throughout their searches, regardless of their previous knowledge or experiences with the college admissions process.

Athletic Choice Factors

The students spent a great deal of time outlining the athletic factors that were important to them as they navigated their college searches. I spent significant time considering where these college choice factors fell within Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice. The factors considered throughout their searches reflect potential items that relate to their resources, various elements of the higher education context, and items that relate to the social,

economic, and policy context. Despite all these elements, the students internalized each of these items through their own individual habitus, including their demographics, social capital, social capital, and how they viewed their own expected costs and benefits of attending college. Because of this internalization and utilization of the information presented to them, I felt this area best relates to the individual habitus.

While each student indicated that their college search was driven by academics rather than athletics, they still indicated the focus they had on athletic factors throughout their searches. Across all of the conversations, seven specific athletic factors came up, with the most attention placed on the coach, the facilities, the visit, the team, and the program success. The other two factors that came up in conversation were the athletic atmosphere and playing time, but those only came up with one student. The first five factors were consistent across each of the students, but the thoughts and opinions on each of the factors did vary slightly among each student.

The Influence of the Head Coach. During my conversations with each student about the college choice factors for student-athletes, the most consistent factor that came up was the head coach and, to a lesser extent, all the coaches. When working with Division III programs, the main coach the students worked with, and described during their interviews, was the head coach**.**

> But I think a lot of it for me was the coaching staff. A lot of it for me, if the coaching staff, like, I think I can judge people pretty well when I first meet them, see if they're like a good person or not something like that. Like actual trustworthy guys. And I think a lot of the coaching staff that I've met have been really nice people. And I enjoy that because if they're just going to be some Johnny Meathead guy, I'm not gonna relate to them very well . . . But I also was looking for a coaching staff that like understands that I'm a

student first and not just an athlete and here to play football. So, I think that's what I've

been narrowing it down to right now.

The students were not only able to recall their positive interactions with coaches throughout their

college searches, but also had vivid recollections of negative interactions with coaches.

As the students navigated their college searches, they interacted with the head coach at

several different points along the process. It was clear throughout our conversations that each

interaction was impactful to the students. The students were thoughtful in how they assessed

each coach, not only through their interactions but also by being very observant with the coaches

and their current players. Gina commented on the thoughtfulness behind the interactions between

the coach and players at her top choice institution.

Okay. Yeah. The third one would probably be how the coach interacts and what the girls

really think about the coach and how they treat them and what the coach has priority on

. . . For the DIII that I'm looking at, her biggest priority was developing you as a person

and not developing you as a lacrosse player. Obviously, she wants you to have skills and

be good at lacrosse and want to better your ability at that. But she also cared about how

you were treating other people, how you were doing in the classroom and how involved

you were in the school. So her whole basis was just on sports and bettering you instead of

bettering you as an athlete.

Emily also spoke to her camp attendance at a school she was no longer considering, where she

saw interactions between the coach and the players that led her to lose interest in the school and

their softball program.

So, I went to a camp at a small DIII institution, and the coach was just really arrogant,

and she was talking down to her players even during the camp. She was calling her

players out, and it just wasn't right. So I just was like, "I'm taking this school off my

list." It just wasn't right.

Emily also described the overall environment she experienced at the camp by saying,

"everything was just unorganized, and she was just disrespectful towards her players and the

other coach. It just didn't attract me to want to be a part of that." While the camps are helpful for

the coaches to view prospects who may be interested in their institutions, it was clear from my

conversations that the students used these camps to evaluate the coaches, too.

Aside from the interactions with coaches during the prospect camps, the students also

valued the time they had to speak with the coaches individually, as well as with their parents. In

their meetings and conversations with potential coaches, the students were able to build

relationships they believed were meaningful and indicated how their relationships would be with

the coaches as student-athletes. Not all of the interactions between the coaches and the students

were positive, as Johnnie indicated with one of the coaches he met with; "We met a coach that

was crazy. Like the [school] guy, he was a giant meathead." In comparison, however, Johnnie

felt like there were other coaches with whom he appreciated his time.

But there was a guy from another school, their head coach, and he was just like a really

passionate guy and he could talk for hours and I mean, he was nice to know, but we

talked about . . . We would just talk and see what we thought of the coaches and what we

thought of the players who we met and stuff like that.

The meetings with coaches allowed the students to get to know the coaches, but the individual

attention they received from the coaches also helped them believe the coaches had a personal

interest in them and that they weren't simply looking for another person to fill a spot.

Through all of their interactions, the head coach was consistently being evaluated by the players, and they wanted to play for someone they could trust and have faith in. Despite the program not having success at her top choice institution, Gina had faith in the coach and her ability to impact the program as a new coach.

But she promised me that this upcoming class and the next upcoming class is going to be one of her biggest recruiting things, and I can also tell, being on a travel team, how many events she goes to and how hard she's trying to recruit to get better players to that, ah, that college. I can just see how dedicated she is to turn the whole program around.

The trust each student had in the head coach throughout their college searches allowed them to have comfort in the thought of playing for the coach once they enrolled at the institution. Becky spoke specifically to what she was looking for in a coach,

I think, for me, I want my coach . . . to be honest. Not saying, "Oh yeah. You'll come and start as a freshman." My coach kind of laid out for me her plans for me and was really transparent with that. And I know what I'm getting myself into and how hard I need to work, and stuff like that. And they're very approachable. Like, I don't feel stupid if I ask them a question.

The head coach was also seen as playing an important role in how a student's experience would be as a student-athlete. The students were all very aware that they were playing sports as an extracurricular activity and that their focuses would be on academics; because of this, they each wanted a coach that understood that context.

Yeah. So, I have heard of girls who go to play college volleyball and then the coaches aren't encouraging or great, or the team atmosphere is just terrible. And that was not something I want to be part of, because I only have four years left and I want volleyball

to be fun and not . . . It's going to be hard work, but I don't want it to be like a chore or something that drains the life out of me.

Regardless of gender or sport, the head coach was consistently at the top of the athletic factors for the students during their college searches. The students were very aware of the significance of the coaches on the success of the programs, and placed a similar emphasis on their role within the students' college searches.

As students were interacting with coaches, there was a strong desire for authenticity and the appreciation for being individually sought after by the coaches. As schools and coaches reached out, the students demonstrated an awareness of whether the communication was specifically targeted at them, or a more general communication. Students valued the individual communications and were often frustrated by generic communications. Johnnie indicated that,

I get letters from a couple places all the time. It'll be a letter, and they'll print them out to make it look like it's handwritten and then they just sharpie in your name. And that annoys me a lot.

The students talked about their experiences with their friends who were going through the process, and they understood when a coach or institution was sending a widespread message versus something specific to them. During this conversation on head coaches, the students agreed on the value of this person in their decision-making processes.

Athletic Facilities. As students were exploring the Division III schools on their lists, their expectations of the facilities, and the impact on their college searches, varied. None of the students indicated that the facilities were one of the main factors in their college searches, but they did say it was something they were noting throughout the process. Gina's top choice was

undergoing a renovation that prompted her to have more focus on facilities than the other students.

> I say pretty important because the DIII's right now it's putting in a multimillion-dollar project where it's an indoor track that they don't have yet. And that was one of the huge selling points for me to go there. It's going to be done the spring of '21. So, going into my spring season we'll have that. That's perfect for right when lacrosse starts, but also it was good because it's going to be a training room area and they're mostly letting nurses in there to get hands-on experience with athletes. Not just like athletic trainers, but also just the nursing side of it, too, to help with like, ACL tears and rehabilitation and stuff like that.

Aside from Gina, the students ranged from not having high expectations of the facilities to the facilities having only a minor impact on their college searches.

> Like some weight rooms I've been to, have been like really, really awful. Like tiny, no air conditioning, just like big boxes with concrete on the walls. That's all they are, like, I don't really think it matters that much at the DIII level. Like I know they're not pulling a ton of money and just go back in their program and it's not like they can give out scholarships or anything. I'm not expecting like big fancy facilities and all that. Just something that works.

Even though the facilities were not the main factor for the students during their college searches, they did notice what each school had to offer. Becky stated of facilities: "So I think it's a nice bonus, but I never let it change my thought about a program." Students appreciated the ability to see the facilities, but were not closely examining the facilities to differentiate between their college options.

Campus Visit Experience. The campus visits that the students attended throughout their college searches were impactful on their admissions processes, specifically when they spoke about visiting the top schools on their lists. When asked about the most memorable part of her college search, Becky described her first visit at her top choice.

> Phew. That's a hard one. Probably when I went on my tour at my top choice school, just the in-depth . . . The depth that they went through on my tour to explain the little story behind buildings or like, "This is where you'll be one day if you decide to come here." Or like, "This is the history behind this building and this has been around for this many years." And I guess tradition was really big. And so when I went on tour and to see how much people on-campus cared about the campus, I think that was really cool to see.

As the students spoke about their visits, they focused on not only what they saw within the physical spaces, but also the interactions they had with other people and the encounters they witnessed between members of the campus communities.

The students valued the individualized experiences they had while on their campus visits. The greater emphasis during their visits was on their interactions with coaches and student-athletes, but the students also spoke positively about their ability to talk with someone from the admissions office. As Gina described, the students believed that their interactions with the students and coaches provided more direct insight into student experiences.

> I've had a few with admissions counselors, but most of them have actually been the coach or some of the players take me around the campus, which is a lot easier because then I already have a background knowledge on them and then they can also show me the student side of it, rather than showing me the administration side of it. So they showed me their dorm rooms and how personal you can make them. And, for the smaller schools,

they showed me what is around them and how they have fun . . . So I think it's a lot more personal with the lacrosse team or the lacrosse coach takes me around rather than someone from admissions.

The individualized experience for students resonated with them more at the small schools they were looking at versus some of the bigger schools they were exploring outside of athletics.

Well, some of the bigger schools, they just sent email, once you get out for visits, they'll be a big group, huge, like 30 people going on that visit, when you have to sign up for it. Versus some of these other DIII colleges, it's one-on-one, they're showing you and they want to get as close to you as possible, which I do think is really cool. And I enjoyed some of those visits I had, where it was kind of like more, a smaller group. So, you could be closer to everyone.

The individualized visits allowed the students and their parents to ask questions openly and hear directly from the coaches, current players, and admission offices about what their experiences would look like as a student-athletes at each institution. The connections made and questions answered during the visits were significant factors for these students as they have navigated their college searches. The idea of genuine interactions throughout the visit process came out again throughout my conversations with students about their campus visit experiences. Students valued seeing the campuses in person and interacting with people across the campuses. Aside from limitations due to COVID-19, the students were able to focus on how the visit contributed to, not detracted from, the authenticity of their college interactions.

The Overall Team and Other Team Members. The students also cared about the other athletes who were on the teams, and the overall environments that existed across the teams. Some of the students had connections or preexisting relationships with players who they were

able to utilize as resources to learn information, while others connected with students during their various visits to campuses or through social media. Gina described the environment with the players on the team at her top choice institution as an impactful factor in her decision process by sharing that "the team chemistry on that team, everyone's best friends. Everyone would do anything for anyone else." Conversely, the players at a school no longer considered by Becky, and the environment they created on their team, led her to stop looking into that school.

> And kind of a big reason I stopped looking at one school was because I had heard that some of their girls were just not enjoying being a part of the team and it wasn't just like one or two people. It was a collective attitude surrounding the team. So I was definitely looking for girls that would encourage each other, just a positive atmosphere. And again, from listening to my friend, that's kind of what my top school was looking like. And I also wanted someone that was . . . a team that wasn't just going to goof around and not win. Everyone wants to be part of a winning team. And so success was also what I was looking for.

As these students were exploring Division III opportunities for collegiate athletics, they understood their college experiences would be the final chapter of their athletic careers, and they wanted to be on a team with teammates they enjoyed being around and who shared similar goals for the team. The students valued the opportunity to connect with the current student-athletes as a way to learn a more authentic viewpoint of the student-athlete experience at each institution.

Program Success. Program success could be defined in a variety of ways, but for the context of the conversations with these students, program success related to the team record. As I spoke with the students about team records, there were some discrepancies about the importance of this factor. However, none of the students indicated it was their top factor. Even though it was

not a top choice factor, the students were still thinking about records when they were trying to visualize their experiences as each institution. Johnnie shared his thoughts on potentially playing for a team with a bad record by saying, "I honestly don't . . . like, I would hate to play for a team that just sucks, honestly. Like if my team was awful, I feel like, why would I want to go there?" The students spoke openly about not feeling excited to be a part of a program with a bad record and a poor environment related to winning.

As each student talked about their thoughts on a program's recent success, they demonstrated connections to other factors important to them. Doug was more open to playing on a team with a poor record because he saw it as an opportunity to play earlier in his college career, which was important to him.

It'd be pretty important, but I wouldn't say that if a college was bad that I wouldn't go there. I just get . . . It's more of, I want to play rather than win . . . I'll play for it. I'll play for anyone. I don't care what the record is, as long as I get to play.

Other students connected the program success and record to the head coach. Even when a team's record had not been good for several years, a belief in the coach overrode that factor for Gina.

The record really meant nothing to me, to be honest. The one I'm looking into right now, it doesn't have the best record, but I have full faith in this coach to completely turn this program around, because this is only her second year. So, she obviously couldn't really coach much last year.

All of the students were aware of the records for each of the teams they were considering as part of their college searches. Despite knowing this information, it was not a main factor for their decision-making processes and was not something that the coaches used as a main reason to attend a specific school for the ones they were considering.

Layer Two: School and Community Context

The students spent a lot of time talking through their college searches and the elements of the searches that fall into the school and community context. Perna (2006) explained the importance of the context in which students make decisions throughout their college search process. The context that a student has within their college search could be both useful and supportive or restrictive in helping a student navigate the process. This context includes the availability of resources, the types of resources they have, and any potential supports or barriers (Perna, 2006). Throughout my conversations, the students demonstrated an awareness of the resources and barriers that made up their contexts, although they did not speak to them directly as such.

Two of the students were from the same high school, but even their school and community contexts were different because the extent to which they utilized their resources and operated within the structural supports were different. Each of the students described their resources and how they approached their own college search in a unique way. However, they each believed that they had a strong support system and a variety of resources at their disposal throughout their college searches. These supports included coaches, teachers, and counselors at their high schools, along with access to information through other resources, as well.

Electronic Resources for Accessing College Information

The students talked through their processes for gaining information about the colleges they were considering, along with other schools they had considered throughout their college searches. Even if they were actively talking with coaches and other campus administrators, they did not indicate that they were their main source of information about the schools. The students utilized several online forums for information, including Google, YouTube, Naviance (a college

search program), institutional websites, and Instagram to learn about the colleges. Specifically, the students provided thoughtful feedback about the resources they had at their high schools and in their communities through college research platforms, school counselors, and coaches at the high schools or on their travel teams. Each of these resources helped the students gain access to information about schools as they progressed throughout their college search processes.

Of the various ways that students found information about colleges, social media platforms were one of the most talked about ways for the students to access information. Even when the students were looking at institutional social media profiles, they saw the information as authentic, but they also appreciated when schools had profiles that allowed more access into the student experience. Emily talked specifically about her top choice institution and how it allow prospective students to view student experiences through social media.

> Searching online, looking at the Instagram profile, social media. Certain schools would have the student takeovers on like, their Instagram page. For example, my top choice did that for a while. And I was reading what each student had to say . . . And it was just all positive things.

Aside from following the institutions, the students looked at sport-specific social media profiles and accounts to learn about the environments and cultures of the teams. As Becky indicated, she spent a lot of time exploring schools online and "then I would find their teams on Instagram or Twitter and follow them and just keep up with their seasons and records and what they were doing outside of volleyball and stuff like that." The students appreciated the flexibility that social media, and the internet in general, gave them when exploring schools online. Becky shared,

Usually if the coach reaches out to me or something like that, we'll just do a quick

Google search and search stuff like class size, engineering all that good stuff. And what's

further. And then that's usually, if I'm actually really interested, I'll go really in depth.

But a lot of the time it doesn't get too in-depth.

Along with their own college search processes online, the students also took advantage of

programs offered by their schools, such as Naviance, but to a much lesser extent than social

media and school websites, when learning about colleges and universities.

The students did use Naviance in their application processes for college, and to connect

with their school counselors on materials that needed to be submitted to specific institutions.

Doug stated that he utilized Naviance to find some school information but also to connect with

his counselor in the application process by stating, "I would say Naviance is pretty important,

especially when it comes to college finding, mainly just colleges really." Despite attending the

same high school, Johnnie stated that he did not find Naviance to be as useful in his experience:

"We do use Naviance, but I haven't really looked into Naviance as much. I just feel like it's

really clunky and I just hate using it." While the students utilized Naviance, or other similar

platforms, the feedback was varied and inconsistent with regard to its effectiveness.

Counselors and Coaches as Resources for Accessing College Information

Outside of the scope of working within Naviance and other systems, the students also

relied on their counselors as resources during their college searches, although their interactions

and the extent to which they served as resources varied among the students. A lot of the

information gained from the school counselors was done through intentional sessions planned by

each of the students' high schools. Becky referenced a session in which the counselors gave the

students useful information, which seemed to help open up communication with Becky and the counselor about the college search process.

> So, our counselor department as a whole did a college search presentation to all the juniors and seniors last year in the auditorium. And they basically walked us through like FAFSA and looking into colleges and like scholarships. And then more specifically I went to my counselor asking questions about how to apply to scholarships and what to expect for interviews and what scholarships I should be applying for and that sort of thing. And so, in that way he's been really helpful.

The students also saw the counselors as helpful people who talked to them about their college searches, but without pushing the students in specific directions based on their own thoughts. For example, Doug shared about his high school guidance counselor,

> She just told me what to fill out, what to do. I would say she did a pretty good job. So, all she had to do is just send it out, once I finished. She sent them off to all the schools I wanted. She's been pretty helpful. I don't think she really sees it that way. I think she just kind of sees it as options. I think she just says like, "If you go there, if you get offered, say [school], just have fun with that experience? If you get a DIII school and play football, have fun, just live the experience." She doesn't really see it as academic systems, I feel like she just sees it as more college options.

Gina also indicated that she had a strong relationship with her counselor by sharing the consistent check-ins from her school counselor.

> He always checked me up and seeing just where I'm at and whether he does need to intervene and give me some of the ideas and the differences between them and I already told him I did most of the research and I kind of knew what I was going to go into.

The school counselors were seen by students as helpful and knowledgeable about the colleges the students were considering and the processes they were going through with applications. Despite not being the priority group of people they turned to for advice, the students appreciated the guidance and feedback from their counselors throughout their college searches.

Aside from their school counselors, the students also spoke about the resources they found in their teachers and their coaches, both at their high schools and through various travel teams on which they played. The teachers were able to provide general guidance on college, whereas the coaches helped the students prepare for what to expect and how to engage with college coaches as athletic recruits. The students felt very comfortable with their teachers, especially Becky, who wants to major in education and saw her teachers as credible sources of information about strong education programs.

I've definitely talked to my teachers at school because they're in education and that's where I want to go. And I've . . . Like they're all really supportive with what I'm thinking and they give feedback and stuff like that. They're like, "Oh, that's great." Or like, "You should look into this program." And besides my teachers and then I didn't really talk to anyone else about where I was going besides my coaches, family, teachers in my immediate circle.

Becky also spoke to her travel coach to learn about the recruitment process, while also taking advantage of her reputation among college coaches in the region to provide her with a platform to connect with coaches.

Yeah. So, my (JO) coach, she was a really well-known coach. She was a coach of the year and everything. So she had already pushed out a bunch of players prior to my team because she would follow girls from when they were 12, all the way to when they were

18. And so coaches already knew girls that she had pushed out. And so I think through that, she had kind of built a reputation for having teams that had recruitable people on them. And so she was really familiar with a lot of coaches and would talk to them. And I think that was really, really helpful. And then her just being proactive and creating things like the showcase. She started creating relationships with these coaches and she knew that she could just approach them. And the one time a coach came to our practice and just sat in the corner and there were always coaches around because of my coach.

Gina also played lacrosse for a travel coach who had connections with coaches as a Division III coach herself, so she was able to use her travel coach and high school coach during her college search.

Yeah, my travel coach coaches a DIII. So obviously she wanted me to go to her DIII and I would have if they had nursing, that would probably be my dream school. But since she was in the same conference as the DIII I'm looking at, she really knows the coach that I'm going to, because she talked to her a lot. And then my high school coach, she got an email just to see what kind of player I was and whether it was right from them to have me on the team, as well.

While the coaches were providing feedback and advice to the students, they also all assisted the students by helping them with recruiting profiles or other mechanisms for getting their information in front of coaches. Doug shared specifically about the commitment his coaches have to ensuring that each player has film available to use on websites for college coaches to see their performances. The coaches were supportive of the students as they were going through the processes and made sure the students knew they were there to help guide them as needed.

Layer Three: Higher Education Context

The Higher Education Context within Perna's College Choice Model focuses on specific aspects of the colleges and universities that a student is considering during their college search. The Higher Education Context includes marketing and recruitment efforts by colleges, the college locations, along with other institutional characteristics (Perna, 2006). As we discussed their college searches, each of the students spent a considerable amount of time speaking to the higher education context, and the various factors as they related to their college searches. While the conversations around a school's location did not lead to a lot of specific information about their thoughts on the impact of proximity, the students were all looking at schools within a local geographic region. Becky shared her rationale for limiting her search initially to only those schools within close proximity to her home.

> Yeah. I probably shouldn't have done this. I chose proximity (as first choice factor)
> because . . . I don't know. I've realized as I got older that I do a lot better in familiar
> settings. And so having a college that was closer to home was a lot more comforting and
> made it a lot more welcoming to me personally.

Aside from the location, which was an initial factor in how the students selected the schools to consider throughout the process, we also spent time talking about the institutional academic characteristics that were important to them, how they viewed the various methods of outreach from each school, and their decisions on whether to pursue athletics at the Division III level or not.

Institutional Academic Characteristics

Academic characteristics of colleges and universities fall into the scope of the higher education context within Perna's (2006) model. "The attributes and characteristics of higher

education institutions also influence student college choice" (Perna, 2006, p. 118). As the students talked through their college choice factors, they were all very clear that they were looking at college from an academic perspective first and that athletics were secondary. During this process, they wanted to focus on how each college could help prepare them for their future beyond the next four years. Emily shared a straightforward sentiment about the focus of her college search by saying, "Honestly, when I was searching academics, it always comes first for me. So that was more of . . . It's the academics. If the school has a good academic reputation. It was just more about the academics for me." Similarly, Becky used her major as the starting point for connecting with colleges about volleyball.

> Yeah. So I knew that ultimately volleyball is going to end for me, but my education is going to have to last me for basically the rest of my life. And so academics were absolutely number one for me. And whenever I was looking, I would first look at the school and then volleyball was a bonus, if that makes sense. And I was like, "okay," because I knew I had options when it came to academics, but I could go places. But with volleyball, I kind of looked at so . . . I was doing all of this back towards the beginning of the year, late 2019. And so then I knew that I could specifically look at schools if I wanted to play volleyball for, because I had figured that out first. And I knew that if I needed to, I could just solely focus on academics. And so I would explore places that were looking for me, but I was like, "If it doesn't fit me academically, then I'm not going to go there." But I was more entertaining schools that were wanting me for volleyball because I knew that that opportunity would probably pass quicker than academic wise.

> As a prospective engineering student, Johnnie also had to explore if colleges offered his

major before considering them to play football. Throughout his search, he was being heavily

recruited by schools without his major, which led him to tell them he was no longer interested in their schools.

> For me, it's obviously academics first. Like I was deciding between majoring in engineering and majoring in business. I went towards engineering. So that cuts out . . . A lot of DIII schools just don't have it or have 2+2 programs with other schools, but that's kind of lame in my opinion . . . So I think academics is the biggest thing for me first. Like I don't have to play football in college. I would like to, but it wouldn't be the end of the world if I didn't.

The students were able to demonstrate a balance of focus throughout their searches, but they all consistently relied on academics as the main factor in narrowing their college options.

When considering academics, the students were looking for schools that would best set them up for success after graduation. In order to be successful, the students looked at specific information on the colleges, such as class sizes, faculty-student ratio, and how students perform on any licensure exams, if applicable. Since the students were focused on being students first, they wanted coaches and an environment where academics were also valued.

> I've always been nervous if I'm going to play a sport, how my academics will do and how I'm going to time manage both of those. And I really liked the DIII a lot better just because they put all the emphasis on school. And I'm going to college for school. I'm not going to college to play lacrosse. Lacrosse is the next four years of my life, school can be the next . . . the rest of my life. So I really wanted to make sure that they put more focus on the school aspect side of it than the lacrosse side of it.

Each student was passionate when talking about their athletic experiences, but they were clear in their expectations that they wanted to be in a place that would allow them to excel in the classroom as a student-athlete, not just as an athlete.

Decision on Division III

Similar to the institutional characteristics related to academics described above, being a Division III institution provides real and perceived characteristic differences from schools within the other NCAA divisions. When this study began, I originally wanted students who were only considering Division III institutions. However, as students began to express interest in participating in this study, an overwhelming majority of them were considering schools across multiple divisions, both for athletics and to simply continue their educations without pursuing varsity collegiate athletics. During some of my initial conversations with students interested in participating, I quickly saw that part of the uniqueness of the Division III recruitment experience could be related to their options across multiple divisions.

These students were navigating their college searches and their interactions with admission offices and Division III coaches, but they were also considering other alternatives to being a Division III athlete. Some of the students were also talking to coaches from Division II schools, while others were also exploring Division I schools where they would attend and not continue playing their sports. Regardless of the other institutions these students were considering, they spent time during their college searches considering the benefits of each type of school they were considering. At the time of my interviews, they all believed that they would finalize their college decisions with a Division III college.

As the students navigated their options around different divisions for athletics, the philosophy of Division III and the focus on academics resonated strongly with the students. Gina

was also considering a Division II school, but she described how she believed the schools were different at that level.

> But the DIIs, it just seemed like they put all their emphasis on sports and I wasn't really looking for that. I was looking for them caring about my major and developing me as a person more than just my athletic ability.

Similarly, Becky was contacted by a Division I school that she also did not believe was the best fit for her academically.

> [School] came and looked at me and one of my teammates and said that they wish we would go to one of their camps or whatever to go down in the recruiting process, to go further. But I wasn't really interested in playing D1 because I valued my education more than athletics.

The students did not experience any coaches talking specifically about their values on academics rather than athletics as a part of the Division III philosophy, but rather that their specific institutions, and their coach in particular, valued the student-athlete as a complete person and was focused on helping them to be successful in the classroom and in their sport. Even though the students would not have athletic scholarships at a Division III school, there was almost a sense of relief they had about knowing their total financial aid up front and not having any money dependent on their participation or performance in their sports.

> While the students explored their athletic options throughout their college searches, they also considered colleges for strictly academic purposes at larger institutions where they would not be considered for athletics. Attending a non-Division III school could potentially provide the students with additional resources and opportunities outside of athletics, but the students saw

potential drawbacks, as well. As a longtime student-athlete, Johnnie explained how he compared attending a larger school versus a smaller Division III school.

> I definitely feel like it would be easier. Because at least when you have a football team you have . . . like, I've met all my best friends through playing football at my school. So, I feel like being on the football team, obviously it's not like the whole freshman class, like you're not, they'd all be pretty tight, so I think it would be good socially. And then I feel like at a smaller school, people at least know who you are a little bit like a couple of years in or something, because if I went to a state school, I could just meet a new person every day for like every day I'm there and nobody would ever know who I am or something like that.

The students valued their athletic experiences throughout high school and believed that they would continue to benefit from being student-athletes throughout college.

School Cost and Financial Aid

Cost was another area where I considered the layers of Perna's (2006) College Choice Model to find the best place to situate this conversation through the lens of the model. Expected costs fall into the individual habitus as the students consider the demand for higher education and their available resources against the benefits and costs of their education (Perna, 2006). The conversations I had with students, while centered around cost from the questions I asked during the conversations, often went into the financial aid process and the types and amount of aid they received from the institutions. I believe that financial aid models that are developed and implemented as part of institutional strategies align within Perna's third layer, higher education context, so I examined these conversations through the lens of this layer. Some differences came up as the students discussed the roles of the institutions in helping complete financial aid

processes, and in their conversations about cost and the process with admission staff. The differences that arose during this conversation seemed to stem from diverse family backgrounds and experiences with the college enrollment process.

As the students described their top considerations and choice factors for the schools they considered, cost came up naturally several times. However, when asked to rank the top factors that influenced their decisions, none of the students listed cost as one of their top three factors. Each student was confident in their academic abilities that led to strong scholarships for academics, which helped reduce the cost of some of the schools they were considering. Doug shared,

> I forgot to mention cost, but cost is a pretty high factor. If it's like, outrageously expensive, but usually people don't ever pay the amount, because of academic scholarships, and off the field scholarships and stuff like that. So, I've been lucky enough to be a good student and study. I've gotten scholarship money for academics, scholarship offers already. So, I know where I stand, when it comes to some financial stuff.

While the costs varied between the schools they were considering, the students acknowledged that the Division III schools were often some of the most expensive institutions they considered. However, that did not prevent them from keeping Division III schools in consideration. Gina specifically echoed this sentiment by saying,

> Yeah, for some reason I decided to go to some of the more expensive schools, which shot myself in the foot with that one. Luckily, I kept my academic side up, too, so I'm getting one of the higher academic scholarships.

In addition to the academic scholarships received, each student referenced some sort of support system in place where someone in their family would be helping them with the cost of college.

Doug described his acceptance that there would be a personal cost to college by saying, "but I think I'm going to have to carry my fair share, of course. But that happens like once I get out of college, I'm just going to take it . . . Gonna enjoy the experience, worry about the cost later." The students acknowledged the cost while not letting it completely dictate their college selection processes.

An important part of the financial aid process for prospective students is to fill out their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). To complete the FAFSA, a student and their parent/guardian (if applicable) must submit specific income, asset, and tax information. Throughout my career, I have heard many students speak to the complexity of the form and the confusion they faced when completing it; that was not the case for Johnnie, who stated,

> I thought the FAFSA was pretty . . . I didn't really think you needed guidance for it. So, the first day it opened up, me and my parents just hopped on that. We did it just to get it out of the way and sent it to the schools I was looking at. But I haven't really needed much guidance for that.

Emily and Becky, who realized their top choice was the same institution and that they worked with the same admission counselor, expressed a different need for support, and felt they were receiving it from their counselor for completing the FAFSA and for understanding financial aid processes in general. Emily specifically indicated,

> I know for me, personally, I have been talking to my admissions counselor a lot, and he calls me pretty frequently just to remind me that my FAFSA's going on. And so I actually filled it out last night. And I emailed him and let him know that I met that deadline. And then I actually have a meeting with him next week. And so I feel like he doesn't leave me hanging for too long, and he's real easy to talk to, and so that's made it

10 times easier. It's because communication's really smooth. And I'm not really ever playing a guessing game because I have all my stuff together.

Becky provided some additional context about why she felt like the admission counselor at her top choice was important for her during her college search, saying, "He'd remind me of deadlines, but it was less about the deadlines and more about just . . . Because none of us have ever been to college before, just being informed throughout the entire process, just because scholarships are very overwhelming." While Doug and Johnnie were not looking for that same level of support, the ability of Becky and Emily to explain the support they received did allow the others to acknowledge that some communications could be helpful. Doug specifically indicated, "Just getting one email just to remind you is nice, but I don't think I really need the spam."

While differences emerged across the students with regard to the support and interactions they were looking for throughout the process, each student was interested in learning about what their exact costs would be for each of the schools they were considering. Even though costs were an important factor for the students in their selection processes, they all indicated that they expected the costs to be higher at the types of schools they were looking at to play Division III athletics. Becky specifically shared with the group that cost was on her mind throughout the process.

Yeah. So, obviously, I could have gone to a much cheaper school. The only reason I'm paying so much is to play sports, and so, getting as much help as I can because of that fact, just because it is primarily that I'm going there for sports, is obviously on my mind. So, I'm excited to sit down and see how much scholarships I can get and what sort of financial aid I'll get. And so that's definitely on my mind.

Each of the students acknowledged at some point throughout the conversation on cost that they understand their college choice may not be the least expensive option for them, and they were alright with not attending the most cost-effective school.

School Outreach Methods

Marketing and recruitment materials fall under the scope of Perna's third layer of her college choice model (2006). During my conversations with the students in this study, they talked about the variety of ways they communicated with coaches and other college staff members. They felt the conversations with coaches were more authentic and that the coaches were really focused on talking to them and getting to know them. They believed admission office communications were less authentic and more sales driven. Gina explained how she viewed the communications from coaches and admission offices differently.

> I get about a thousand emails a day from different colleges, mostly admissions, and I delete all of them. I just view what name it is, just to see if it is, I feel like, my main school. See if I actually need to look at it. But if it's ones that are way out of the state, I'm not even going to look at. But if it's a school . . . Or if it's a lacrosse coach, I always save them. I read them all the way through. Sometimes I even respond to them, basing off of if I've heard of that program before and if I've looked into them. I just want to keep contact just in case something falls through. But I hardly ever talk to any other admissions or even look at other admission things, because I feel like that's just spam email sent to everybody and not personalized just for you.

The volume of emails that the students received from admission offices left them feeling more frustrated with their communications rather than thinking they were helpful. Johnnie shared,

I think a few months ago I would get like 10 things in the mail every single day. And

they're just annoying because they were just like random general information. Like I just

don't care. It's not going to be personal.

The students were quick to note that they rarely hesitated to mark the emails as spam or send

them to their trash folders.

Yeah. So, coach communication stayed in my inbox, and admissions typically went

straight to my trash. Just because I get probably 10 admissions emails a day. And when

it's . . . If it was a college I was actually looking into, I would explore it and then be like,

"Oh, okay." And then it'd go into the trash just because they are so overwhelming. And

there's so many. My school makes us sign up for this college options website. And so we

end up getting plagued with so many admissions emails and it just kind of gets annoying

at one point. But coach emails, you know that they're specifically meant for you and

they're not sent out like a mass body of people. And so I definitely looked at those a lot

more in depth than admissions.

The students believed that some email communications from an admission office were useful,

but those were only from the schools they were interested in and actively pursuing. If the student

was getting outreach from the school without inquiring first, the email made them feel annoyed

and did not make them investigate the school in more depth.

As the students received various communications, aside from deleting the admission

office messages, the students would often engage with the coaches, even if they were not

interested in the schools.

If they're a coach I always try to respond to them. I'll open it, usually see it and be like,

I'll do a little bit of research on the college. And if I see like they don't have engineering

or like they're four hours away. And at the point where I've already got all my

applications done, I just usually tell them I'm not interested in all that, but I'll at least

respond to them because I know they actually took some time to text me.

These student interactions with coaches were also more likely to occur through a variety of

channels rather than mostly through emails or phone calls from an admission office. Coaches

would often initiate conversations with students through specific recruitment platforms or even

social media. Johnnie shared how the coaches he interacted with would follow him through his

Twitter account.

> I have Huddle. I don't think a lot of coaches found me through Huddle if I'm going to be
>
> honest, but I have a Twitter account. I used to have all my . . . like my ACT score and my
>
> GPA and all that stuff in my bio. So then a lot of coaches would just follow me and DM
>
> me and be like, "Hey, we want you to come out to campus or to start recruiting or all
>
> that."

The coaches would also try to connect their recruits with current students to learn more about

their program. Becky indicated,

> I got texts a lot from their assistant coaches. And then more like . . . So the texts were
>
> more personalized obviously. And then for their season updates or like, "Hey, we have a
>
> player recruit zoom meeting where you can ask players questions and yada, yada, yada."
>
> I got those through email.

The students felt a sense of pride when hearing from a coach and would respond to their outreach

and engage in a conversation because they appreciated that they took the time to personally reach

out to them. Even the messages from an admission office that may have been personalized

specifically for them were not seen in the same way, although they did appreciate learning more things about the schools that they were going through the application process for.

During each interview, the students all spoke about the importance of coaches in their college searches, and the excitement they felt when they received communications from them. As those conversations unfolded, I asked questions about how they viewed admission emails during their searches, and whether they carried a similar weight in their importance for the students. Since the answers all indicated that the coach communications were more effective, I took some time during the focus group to utilize five sample admission emails to solicit their feedback. The emails I used ranged from longer messages that were clearly mass email communications, to shorter email messages that were either personalized outreach, or designed to look that way to the students viewing them.

As I showed each email, the students easily pointed out and agreed upon the issues they saw with each message we reviewed. The first email that I showed the students highlighted upcoming deadlines that the college wanted to make sure the students were aware of. The students felt like they would be annoyed if this was coming from a school they had not reached out to personally, but that if it was a school that they were considering then they would be less frustrated by it. Doug echoed sentiments from Johnnie by saying,

> If it was a school I wanted to go to I would know when I would have to apply and everything. But if it's just some junk mail that never talked to a school before, it's probably going in the trash probably, like you said. Not block them, but just ignore them.

Even though the email was shorter than most of the ones the students reviewed, and they appreciated some of the colors and fonts used to differentiate the text, they would not have taken time to read this email completely.

The second email we reviewed contained many links to help students directly access information that was important to them on the school's website. Despite containing these helpful links, the email was still lengthy and was not visually appealing or useful for the students. Becky indicated,

> I don't know. I just . . . I don't want to say I'm lazy, but if I look at an admissions email with a bunch of links in it, I just don't ever go to the links. I know what I want to do, and if I really have something that I really want, I'll schedule a visit or talk to someone. I just email my admissions counselor directly and talk to them. And it might be because I'm playing a sport and I already know down where I want to go, so it makes it easier. So, I can understand how the people who are going to college not for sports could see that, how it'd be a bit more helpful. But, for me, if I see links, I just don't even look at them.

Johnnie shared similar thoughts on links by saying, "I think I've clicked a link maybe once" across all the college emails he had ever received. Even though the links were included in the email to direct students to information they wanted, the students did not look at the email as something that would be helpful to them during their college searches.

The students did not have as much to say about the third email, aside from some general acknowledgments that they thought this one was a little better than the previous two. One comment that did come out about this email was that it was too long. Becky described her thoughts on the length of the email.

> I think this one is a little bit more personalized. And I see more into what the school offers, and less "Come to our school," I guess. So, I mean, in that aspect I like it, but I just probably wouldn't. I skimmed it when I first read it because it was kind of long.

In providing feedback on this email, the students indicated they wanted information that was relevant and concise, and they shared what information they thought was important. If an email had too much included, they would skim the email at best, and most likely not even read through the entire message.

The fourth message was an email that did not contain any links or specific calls to action. Instead, this message was focused on asking the student a few key questions that would potentially prompt the student to respond. All of the students felt this was the best email of the four because it was personal and seemed to be from someone that genuinely cared about them, not just a mass message that went to everyone. Johnnie talked about how he liked this email.

> I actually like this one because it actually seems personal. So, this would probably be something I'd actually look at. If it was a school I wasn't interested in, I probably still wouldn't respond, but I would actually give it some thought.

Emily agreed with Johnnie's thoughts about this email and shared, "Yeah. You can definitely tell if it's the actual person writing it, rather than just mass emails." Similarly, Becky felt as though this email was something she would expect to see from a smaller Division III school, saying, "Yeah. I think it captures more of the DIII vibe where they actually care about you and what you think, and they're not pushing information, like Johnnie said." This email was one that made the students feel a more genuine connection with the sender.

Across each of the emails, the students shared that they wanted personal connections with the colleges they were considering. When the language was overly formal or too wordy, they immediately wrote it off as lacking authenticity. Additionally, the students wanted to be given the information instead of being sent on a scavenger hunt through a series of links to the school website. If the email was not personal and contained too much information, the students were

quick to highlight that they would send the email to their junk folder or just delete it; this was something that they all experienced doing throughout their college searches.

Layer Four: Social, Economic, & Policy Context

Within the fourth layer of her model, Perna (2006) demonstrated an understanding that factors exist outside of the student and their immediate sphere of influence throughout their college search. In any given year the social, economic, and policy context may vary and provide different opportunities or challenges for students as they navigate their college searches. Some potential elements that often fall into this context include academic preparedness, social forces, economic conditions, or public policies (Perna, 2006). As these students entered a new phase of their college searches during the second semester of their junior years, they encountered a global pandemic unlike anything in recent history. This brought about changes in opportunities they had for testing, college admission criteria changes, public policy shifts, and even potential implications on a personal level.

Impact of COVID-19

As each of the students talked about COVID-19, and the impact the pandemic had on their college searches, they shared information related to the direct impact on their college searches, but also highlighted the impact that it had on their athletic seasons. The impact on their athletic seasons had an indirect effect on their college searches, as well. Students shared information about the impact of COVID-19 on their college searches when I asked them specific questions about how the pandemic influenced their searches, but they also brought up the impact of COVID-19 as they were talking through other aspects of their college searches, as well. For the students, the pandemic and their college searches are not isolated events. Rather, they are intertwined through their experiences.

One of the most significant impacts the students discussed related to the pandemic and their college searches was that it limited their ability to visit colleges they were considering. Doug talked through the uncertainty the pandemic caused for him as he attempted to visit colleges during his search.

> I would say it's been impacted just mostly off of visits, because most schools by now I would have already been able to visit and pretty much be able to have my decision like sooner than later. But due to COVID, not many schools are open for visiting, or very much at the high point of it, they weren't open. Once it started opening back up, I was busy with football. So, it's just been a whirlwind, I guess, would be with COVID.

Similarly, each of the participants talked about the lack of visit options as a result of the pandemic and highlighted that they did not find the virtual visit opportunities as meaningful in their college searches as actually going on in-person visits.

> That was something [virtual visits] that I definitely did not want to do. If I absolutely could not go on campus I would have, but if there was an option, I was definitely going to go on campus and not do the virtual tour, because you don't get the same experience with that. You get to see the best parts of the campus, they're not going to show you the worst parts. So I definitely wanted to go on campus rather than do the virtual visits. If I had to, I definitely would have, but it was more important for me to actually see it. (Gina)

Despite not enjoying the virtual visit experience, as Gina indicated, if they were the only available option, the students tried to attend. Johnnie shared similar thoughts in his interview by stating, "Yeah, I've done a couple of virtuals. I don't know. I kinda hated them, I'm not going to lie. They're good for like 40 minutes and then I just get really bored." Emily also reluctantly took a few virtual visits and had similar experiences with campuses, saying, "They were only

having virtual tours. And I took a couple of virtual tours, but it's just not the same as actually stepping foot on campus."

When speaking about the pandemic, the students also shared the different experiences they had as athletes with altered environments for playing and changes or cancellations to their seasons. Emily, a softball player, indicated that her ability to still play on a travel team after her junior season was cancelled had helped fill the void from her school season.

It really didn't impact it that much because over the summer my travel softball team played and I could still reach out to the coaches. And since we were outside, they could still come and watch me play. So, it really didn't impact the athletic side of it.

Emily had played on a travel team in previous summers, so that experience was not different, but for Gina, she had to play on a traveling lacrosse team for the first time in order to have exposure to college coaches.

Yeah, it really put a damper on things. So with me not having my lacrosse season last year I had to do this travel season, because I didn't have any film of me playing and no college is going to want you if they've never seen you play before. Since lacrosse is a spring sport, they wouldn't really recruit me until my last few months of high school. So I had to play on this travel team just to get out there and get my name recognized a little bit. And luckily my coach did go and saw me play. So, she knew kinda what she was looking for.

Since the other three participants were not being recruited for spring sports that were cancelled when the pandemic interrupted the seasons, they did not have as much to share about the consequences on their athletic experiences.

Test Optional Policies

As a result of COVID-19, many institutions moved toward a test optional policy for both admissions and financial aid decisions. The participants had a good conversation around their experiences with standardized testing during the pandemic and the potential impact it had on their college searches. One participant, Emily, was especially happy that the pandemic allowed for more schools to move toward a test optional policy, specifically stating that,

> For me, I was happy to see it because I'm not a good test taker under a certain amount of time. And especially because the test was four hours long, and I also think that just over a test, you can't just, not judge somebody, but judge their academic potential off a test. I think the GPA comes better in play when applying for a college. And I still give my SAT scores, but I think that going test optional was better.

Other participants, such as Johnnie, did not think the test optional policy change at most institutions benefited his college search.

> For me, personally, I was really mad to see all the colleges go test optional because I tested really highly in the ACT, and especially if you super score it, it gets even higher. And so, I applied to a prestigious school out of state, and they saw a 62% increase in applications. It was just crazy. So, I got rejected from there. I would have had a better shot if people couldn't have gone test optional. But even with [school] I know their application numbers went up because people who have good transcripts, and maybe not good test scores, could just go test optional and get in. And get money like that. So, for me personally, I was not happy to see that.

Despite having a different personal experience, Doug was able to relate to Johnnie's frustration with the test optional process.

I felt like the ACT being optional . . . that really helped me, personally. But I can see

where Johnnie's coming from too because when he tests well, and I have another kid who

gets, maybe, say a 20 and he gets the same amount of money . . . I would see why he's

upset.

The conversation around test optional policies highlighted that not everyone experienced

the announcement of the test optional policy in the same way. Even throughout disagreements

about their own personal beliefs about schools moving towards a test optional policy, students

were able to articulate an understanding of the differing viewpoints in the conversation. Overall,

there was an elevated level of frustration with the test registration and completion process

throughout the pandemic. Each of the students had some exposure to testing prior to the

pandemic and had taken active steps to better their test scores moving forward, but they were

unable to take the test again or were delayed by several months after their intended test dates.

Findings Pertaining to Each Research Question

Throughout my five interviews with high school seniors going through their college

searches in exploration of Division III institutions to be collegiate athletes, I was able to learn

about key elements of their searches and the factors that helped drive their decision making.

After the interviews concluded, I was able to conduct a follow-up conversation to confirm

findings and explore some of the complex factors that came out of the interviews in more depth.

Within each of my conversations, I identified components of their college searches that expanded

across the four layers of Perna's conceptual model of College Choice. Additionally, I was able to

identify themes that would allow me to address the research questions that drove this study.

Research Question One

Research Question one was: How do prospective student-athletes at Division III institutions describe their recruitment process?

While each of the students had different experiences and some variations in their experiences, they all spoke to a process, interactions, and thoughts that closely mirrored the others. When the students first started considering their college options at the beginning of high school, their initial thoughts focused more broadly on college. It was only after more time playing their sport and hearing from high school and other coaches that they began to see themselves as collegiate athletes. After this recognition, each of the students continued to consider whether to pursue collegiate athletics, and which division would best fit them, throughout their college searches. When I asked students about the most significant milestones or moments in their college searches, they each spoke about their realization that they officially had the ability to continue their sport in college. Doug highlighted the impact of this moment in relation to the work leading up to the moment by stating, "I feel like the biggest milestone is once you get that official offer . . . And once you realize this is real and that they offered you a spot, that's probably the biggest milestone for me as well." Similarly, Emily added the impact of the outreach from coaches on her college search by saying, "Mine is definitely when I started getting offers from other schools, and it made me realize that I'm actually doing this, and I can actually play in college. It just boosted up my confidence." Despite having some thoughts or aspirations to play in college, the outreach from the coaches allowed each of the students to consider their athletic options more strongly.

Additionally, each student spoke to the support they received throughout their college search processes from their families, friends, coaches, and other school administrators. The

students gave either a high school coach or a travel coach credit for helping them connect with college coaches and better understand the college recruitment process. The level of involvement and support each student received from coaches varied from simply being a sounding board to talk through questions about the process and specific schools, to more engaged assistance that Becky described receiving from her JO coach.

> Yeah, so I didn't really start looking until my 16th year of JO . . . And my coach was really proactive in pushing colleges in our direction, and so we had a showcase at my gym that I played. And from there, I was looking at different schools, but I was kind of clueless on the whole process. So my coach had us all . . . All my teammates made up pre-ready to go recruiting forms that you handed out to people at tournaments and stuff.

Johnnie's football coach did not hold a specific showcase for him, but he did indicate that the coach was proactive in helping throughout the recruitment process by saying,

> They have little sheets made up of each player and like all of their stats on their measurables, all this stuff. And they, I believe, just send them out to the different colleges that fit the criteria they're looking for. And then those coaches would text me or just email me or something like that.

Regardless of the support received by the students from their coaches throughout their college searches, the students expressed an appreciation for their assistance and guidance.

The students also spoke to the type of outreach from colleges in a similar way—they wanted to hear authentic stories from the universities and feel like they were being individually sought after; most of this kind of attention came to them from coaches and not admission offices. Gina compared the communications between coaches and admission offices by sharing her thoughts that,

Yeah, it's a lot more personal. It's not just a spam email that they're going to send to 100 girls. It's one that, I looked at your stats. I really liked you and I really want to keep in contact with you. Rather than you can get this scholarship if you apply to this school. So it's a lot more personal with a coach rather than an admissions email.

Becky also shared that the authenticity of the coaches she worked with throughout her college search was effective in helping her feel more comfortable learning about the school.

And so if I needed something, I could just shoot them off an email and/or a text and they'd get back to me pretty quick. And my phone's always in my hand, so it wasn't like I had to go through a long process to ask them something.

All of the students who participated in this study saw academics as the main factor in their considerations, but the coaches as the most influential people who they worked with throughout the process. The authenticity of the coach appealed to the students beyond just their sport and resonated with them as they learned about the entire campus.

Finally, with a senior year that had been largely defined by COVID-19, the students talked about the impact on their college visits, test taking opportunities, and general recruitment events. The students each agreed on the impact of COVID-19 on their visits, but they appreciated that they were still able to see most of the schools they were considering. Even though there was a shift to virtual visits for most admission offices for a period of time, the students were able to visit campuses and still connect with coaches. Johnnie shared,

I actually really enjoyed getting out to go on visits. I know I couldn't really go on a lot this year, but through football I had a lot of opportunity to go and visit, but maybe those places weren't offering admissions tours or anything like that. So I think that that was

definitely pretty cool. I just liked being on campuses and seeing all the buildings and

everything. Like I just think it's really cool to do.

Despite these added challenges, they all spoke optimistically about their college search

experiences and did not dwell on anything related to modifications due to the pandemic.

Research Question Two

Research Question two was: How do prospective Division III student-athletes perceive

the influence of college choice factors during their college choice?

The students spoke at length across all of the interviews and the focus group related to the

various factors they were considering throughout their college searches. The students were open

about schools they considered where one of the top factors for them did not align with their

experiences with the school, along with times when they felt a school perfectly aligned with what

they were looking for. Each of the students stopped considering a school as a result of their

academic programs, as Johnnie described by saying,

I've already stopped talking to a school, because they don't have engineering or like

another school because they didn't have it either, they have a 3-2 with another school

recruiting me. Okay, so I don't know why I'd go there.

As they spoke about the top factors they considered throughout their searches, they also shared

that the things they considered important may not have been the things they thought would be

important to them two or three years ago. Across each conversation, the students were clear that

they were going to college as students first, and that academics was their top priority. Doug, for

example, shared his perspective of academics versus football.

I feel like those [academics] would probably be more important, because football is like

part of your life. And it's only technically eight years of serious ball, but I would

definitely look more on the academic side, because it sets you up for basically the rest of your life. You just have to be smart with it.

Each of the students had crossed schools off their consideration list as a result of not aligning properly from an academic standpoint.

The top athletic factor for the students was the head coach for the sport they were considering. The students admitted that they were not only listening to what the coaches said to them, but also closely watching how they interacted with their current players while they were at camps or on campus visits. The students wanted to play for coaches who demonstrated a commitment to their players and the team and were genuine throughout the recruitment process. Emily shared that within her college search, "It honestly came down to the camps and the coaches. Like, each coach has a different coaching style. And when you're at the camps, you can just see how they interact with their current players." The students also spoke to the importance of being able to portray their commitment and instill it into the program. Within this area, Doug shared

I guess, the energy he brings. Or he or she brings. If I have a coach that's just kind of like, "He's all right. Dude, he just talks, but talk forever, but it doesn't seem like he's really energized about it." Versus like a coach he sees the future for his program and he's excited for the upcoming freshmen. Like, that's what I would say is more of my speed for a coach.

Other key factors that the students indicated for their college searches were the campus visits, the proximity to home, and the cost of attendance.

Research Question Three

Research Question three was: How do Division III student-athletes perceive the role of their parents/guardians throughout their college search?

During my conversations with the students from my study, they were clear in the fact that they appreciated and valued their parents' support throughout their college searches, often seeking out feedback from them during the process. As the students spoke about the roles of their parents throughout their college searches, three ways to describe their involvement emerged: supportive, involved, and concerned. The parents demonstrated concern for their children in terms of picking the right school or making sure their school was safe, but never in a way that the students felt was overbearing during the process. Gina spoke specifically to the focus her dad had on her safety on campus, and that he was comforted by her top choice being in an area he was familiar with.

> My dad's whole family grew up down by . . . where the college was. So he already knew the area. He was comfortable with me going that far, being his little girl and having three boys above me. He was constantly going down there because he knew that his family was down there just in case I needed anything.

Becky shared a similar sentiment about her parent's involvement in conversations about safety.

> And they know that [my top choice] has a good reputation like that . . . So in that sense, they were kind of staying in my ear about that. And then just colleges that aren't in great areas when it comes to safety.

Safety came up as a concern by parents for each of the female participants, but did not come up as an issue or conversation point with the male participants.

Each of the students spoke to how they appreciated their parents' involvement and believed they were supportive and encouraging, and that regardless of the outcome, their parents would continue to be supportive of them. Doug demonstrated this appreciation by sharing,

> My parents were pretty much like Johnnie. Freshman, sophomore year, they would every once in a while say, "hey you should think about college." I was like, "whatever." And then now, once senior year hit, and then I obviously got coaches' emails, and then I started looking into it. It's nice because they feel like wherever I go it's not a lose situation. Anywhere I go is not a bad choice, so I've been really grateful to have my parents just kind of join me for the ride.

As the parents supported their students, the students in the study also each shared that their parents were focused on the holistic college experience and not just athletics. Becky shared with me that her parents let her focus on the fit for volleyball by saying,

> I don't think that specifically they were so concerned about volleyball as long as I got to play and was enjoying myself. They didn't really look too much into the programs and kind of left that up to me and my coach to decide on. So they were pretty lax about where volleyball wise I was looking...

At one point in my focus group conversation, I asked the students if there was anything they would want their parents to have done differently during their searches. After a few moments of silence and some uncomfortable "ums" and sighs, the students said they didn't see anything they could have done differently and that they valued their parents' input and involvement just the way it was.

Limitations

Overall, this study provided useful information surrounding the college search experience for prospective Division III student-athletes, along with the influence of college choice factors and the role of their parents during the process. There were a few limitations to this study. As I spoke with each of the students in our phone interviews and the follow-up focus group conversation, they provided a lot of significant information about their college searches. However, I still believe the interactions could have provided more detailed information had we been able to meet in person. Additionally, recruiting the participants took additional time as a result of students and high school staff schedules being remote and not as consistent as they would have been in another year when COVID-19 was not present. In order to recruit participants, my outreach efforts had to expand. The students who had the time and ability to talk to me during their senior year make up only a small percentage of their cohort going through their college searches for fall 2021. Finally, the issues with participants included a challenge in arranging a time for all the students to participate in the focus group. After two failed attempts with only two students each time, I was able to host a focus group with four of the five participants.

Another perceived limitation to this study is that the sample size only consisted of five participants. Within qualitative research there is no set standard for the number of participants required to meet a standard for the research (Blaikie, 2018; Lowe et al., 2018; Merriam, 2009; Sim et al., 2018). Similarly, Boddy (2016) indicated, "Qualitative research often concerns developing a depth of understanding rather than a breadth, particularly when undertaken under a non-positivist paradigm, such as that involving depth psychology or a constructivist approach to research" (p. 430). The research conducted with five participants gave me insight into the

recruitment and enrollment process for prospective Division III student athletes. In order to ensure that data saturation was met, I kept track of new themes that emerged from my conversations, and found that the conversations on each student's college search and their choice factors were not creating new themes that would require further exploration with additional participants.

Conclusion

After spending several months trying to find participants for my study, I was excited when I had an increase in interest and was able to find five participants who were able to interview within a 10-day period. This quick timeline allowed me to spend those 10 days immersed in the process and focused on what I was hearing from each of the students. This immersion helped me to develop an interview guide for the focus group that expanded upon the themes and factors that emerged from my conversations. In each of my conversations, the students demonstrated a thoughtful but not rigid approach to their college searches. Regardless of their specific order for their top choice factors, the students all demonstrated a focus on authentic interactions and the desire to feel wanted at the schools that were recruiting them. The students all had a strong support system at home and within their sphere of influence that helped guide them as they navigated working with college coaches and other administrators as they narrowed their college options. When I started this project, I initially wanted to focus on those students who were only looking at Division III schools, but I am glad I expanded beyond that focus because it highlights the complexity of decisions that student-athletes at the Division III level have to manage. Overall, the students were appreciative of their experience and thankful to have the opportunity to continue their athletic careers for four more years as they focus on establishing a foundation for a career that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During this study, I spent time conducting five interviews with high school seniors who were being recruited to be Division III college athletes and one focus group with four of these students to follow up on the individual interviews. As I spoke with each student, I was able to gain insight into the experiences they had throughout their college searches and identify how they made sense of the process and what was important to them as they narrowed their college options. Within this chapter, I present the conclusions that I drew from these conversations about their college searches. Additionally, I provide information on how Perna's college choice model related to the prospective Division III college students within the study, along with considerations for admission and athletic departments to keep in mind as they recruit prospective student-athletes. Finally, I highlight future research that could build upon the information presented from this study to gain a more holistic view of the prospective Division III athletic recruit experience.

Key Findings and Conclusions

As outlined within Chapter 4, the students within this study were able to provide some clear insights into their college search processes. When examined through the lens of my research questions, I have developed four key findings: the students sought authentic interactions with the colleges that were recruiting them, the students received guidance and feedback from current coaches in their lives, academic offerings provided a foundation to the student college search, and parents were influential participants in each student's college search. Each of these factors highlights that the students interviewed were intentional in their choices and interactions

throughout their college searches and took time to be thoughtful about the long-term implications of their college choices.

Authentic Interactions

Throughout my conversations with students, the value placed on authentic interactions came across in a variety of ways. The most standard view of authenticity was highlighted in how the coaches interacted with the students while they were being recruited. Johnston (2010) highlighted the importance of relationships between prospective students and faculty and staff on campus throughout their college search process. Regardless of the topic, the students wanted honest, straightforward, and transparent responses to the questions they asked the coaches. Coaches have been described as critical to college choice decisions for prospective collegiate athletes across the literature on college choice (Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Klenosky et al., 2001; Lim et al., 2017; Pauline, 2010; Popp et al., 2011). The students may have asked questions about their ability to play as freshmen, what the environment was like on the team, or if the schools offered the desired majors to get them where they hoped to be in their future careers. The answers may have been important, but more important was the ability to establish trust in what the coaches were telling them. If a student is going to play for a coach, the relationship should be built on a stable foundation that is established during their recruitment process.

Additionally, the students carefully assessed the environments during their experiences on campuses to ensure the experiences matched what they were being sold throughout the recruitment process. The importance of a student's assessment of the campus environment has been well documented among college choice research (Johnston, 2010; Mansfield & Warwick, 2005; Reynolds, 2006; Secore, 2018a, 2018b). The students within this study were aware of any discrepancies between the environments they saw and the environments they were sold when

talking with coaches and admission counselors or reading materials sent to them from the institutions.

The students were also looking for authenticity in how the institutions portray themselves overall. Colleges and universities tend to provide marketing materials for prospective students that portray only an ideal state at the institution (Klassen, 2001). When an institution sends out information, whether it is through a traditional means of communication or a newer communication means through social media, the students value authenticity. This value for an authentic representation of the institution goes against the research that indicates schools should focus on having visually appealing materials that highlight only targeted messaging and outcomes (Hartley et al., 2008). Rather than hearing from people employed by the institutions, one way for institutions to demonstrate authenticity is to engage current students in their messaging. Similarly, the students wanted outreach that demonstrated the schools knew who they were, and that they were reaching out to them for a specific reason rather than receiving general messages that appeared to lack sincerity and, potentially, authenticity. The 2018 State of College Admission Report (Clinedinst, 2019) indicated social media as the ninth ranked recruitment strategy for colleges and universities; the students within this study found social media provided them an authentic lens into the student-athlete experience.

While the interactions between these prospective students and the institutions mostly occurred with coaches and admission staff members, faculty members also played a role in this authenticity. Faculty members have been cited as playing an important role in helping students understand the academic program at the institutions a student is considering (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005; Reynolds, 2006). Several of the students in this study were exploring majors that were more rigorous and demanding. During their college searches, the students had the

opportunity to connect with faculty members at the colleges they were exploring. These conversations included the idea of balancing being a student-athlete and studying within that major. In this capacity, authenticity related to the faculty members being able to explain the ability of students truthfully and accurately within their majors to balance their coursework with the schedule of a Division III athlete. Even if part of the response from the faculty members was that the balance is manageable but challenging, with some specific suggestions for success, the students valued the transparency from the faculty members.

Guidance and Feedback From Current Coaches

Lim et al. (2017) highlighted the impact that qualitative studies can have on the research into the college search process for prospective collegiate student-athletes. While research provides significant information on the importance of the college coach and their ability to establish relationships with prospective students during their college search (Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Klenosky et al., 2001; Lim et al., 2017; Popp et al., 2011), I was unable to find research into the role of high school coaches on the recruitment process for their current athletes. The NCAA recognizes the role of high school coaches (along with teachers and counselors) and encourages college coaches to establish and maintain relationships with them (NCAA, 2018). The lack of information on the role and involvement of high school coaches may result from the quantitative nature of the majority of previous research that focuses on specific college choice factors after the process, rather than focusing on an examination of the recruitment and enrollment process as it is occurring.

While previous research has indicated the importance of relationships and the role of college coaches (Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Klenosky et al., 2001; Lim et al., 2017; Popp et al., 2011), I believe the student-coach relationships are also important at the high school level. The

coaches of the students in my study, both at the high school level and those coaching traveling teams, were instrumental in helping the students understand and navigate their college searches and recruitment processes. The students within this study relied on the coaches to provide resources to help increase their visibility with college coaches and understand how to best connect with them throughout the early stages of their searches. The roles that these coaches played in helping their students differs from the support from other school administrators, or often even their parents, because the coaches offer connections and knowledge that is specific to NCAA recruiting guidelines, how to attract college coaches, and often even their own athletic experiences during high school or college. The activities conducted or initiated by the coaches gave the students athletic exposure beyond what the school counselors could provide.

The students also relied on their coaches during high school when they were contacted by the college coaches to inquire about students who were being recruited. The coaches were able to provide information on their student-athletes to the college coaches that were unique because of their coach-to-athlete relationships with the students. Czekanski and Barnhill (2015) highlighted the importance of the reputation of college coaches throughout the recruitment process; the relationships with high school coaches also allows the students to hear about the college coaches based upon the coach interactions with the college coaches. While a student may work with college coaches for only a single recruitment cycle, the high school coaches likely have a more sustained relationship with additional information and knowledge they can pass onto the student. The roles of coaches may vary, but they could include activities such as helping the students put together a profile sheet, locating camps to attend, or even arranging to have college coaches attend practices to view the students in action. Due to their roles in the recruitment process, it is

important that the high school coaches understand recruiting policies and guidelines to help the student avoid violating any rules that could impact their eligibility to play at the collegiate level.

Academic Offerings

As each of these prospective Division III student-athletes described their college searches, the foundation of what they were looking for began with a focus on their academics. The NCAA recruitment guide (2018) highlights the importance of academics for Division III student-athletes and encourages coaches to talk with prospective students about the academic opportunities at their institutions. Each student in my study heard from numerous coaches throughout their college searches, and an early key for the student to continue the conversation with a coach was to consider whether the school offered the academic programs they were considering. Some students may be more uncertain of a major when exploring their college options; however, the students in this study all had specific majors already determined that helped guide their processes. The rankings and statistics about the academic programs were noticed by these students during their searches, but they were generally focused on the presence of the major as they started to narrow their searches. Other studies have highlighted the importance of academics for student-athletes looking at smaller institutions (Goss et al., 2006; Pauline, 2010). Details such as job placement and licensure exam passage rates became more important as the students began to narrow their searches. The students within my study who were exploring licensure-based programs, such as Gina's interest in nursing, led her to highlight the exam passage rates as part of her search criteria. Colleges and universities that attempted to misrepresent the majors offered at their campuses earned frustration from students.

In addition to valuing the opportunity to enter into a specific major at their institutions, the students were focused on being able to balance their roles as students and athletes. The

coaches played a role in talking about their experiences, but the students found more value in hearing about this balance from people other than the coaches. If a prospective student can hear from a faculty member or current team member about their experiences, it has a more lasting impact on the prospective student's belief in their ability to successfully navigate these two roles. Several students within my study highlighted the connection with faculty members as an important or meaningful moment in their college search. While Mansfield and Warwick (2005) highlighted the faculty-student ratios and perceived reputation of the faculty members, these students were more focused on who the faculty were and what their relationships would look like with them as a student. Simply saying the faculty are an important factor for students during their college search may be too expansive for the variety of ways in which students process their options and make choices. For these students, who were specifically looking for a small Division III institution, relationships were important across their search, and faculty were included in the important relationships.

Gabert et al. (1999) found that student athletes looking at NCAA Division I athletic programs were focused on academic support when considering institutions. However, none of the students in this study acknowledged that they were considering specific support mechanisms as part of the factors they were considering. Each of the students involved in this study were students with above a 3.0 GPA and above average test scores, so their perceptions of their need for academic support may have been different if they were students who had struggled academically throughout high school. The students wanted support, guidance, and encouragement from their coaches with their academic pursuits, but they did not specifically indicate academic support as a critical factor in their process.

Influence of Parents

      The students in this study relied on their parents to be active participants in their college search processes. Students view parents as influential in the decision-making process when selecting a college (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000), but also prior to that moment when they are first considering their college aspirations and making initial decisions about what schools to consider (Paulsen, 1990). The students in this study spoke to the roles their parents played, from pushing them to start considering colleges during their first and second years of high school, through having conversations with the student about financial aid and cost implications as they tried to make their final choices. The structure of the conversations on cost were different for each student since each student comes from a different financial situation; some students had parents who were going to be involved in covering the costs, while others were going to be covering the costs on their own. Regardless of the family circumstances for paying for college, each student still had those conversations with their parents.

      The students in this study also relied on their parents for feedback as they explored the colleges they were considering. As students went on college visits, they brought their parents along with them and had intentional conversations about how the visits went. Gina explained how her parents spent their time during the time she spent on campus visits.

> They both show up to that and then they kind of tour the city while I'm playing at the campus. They get to see what's around there and how I would like it. And then, uh, my mom did a lot of the research side of it. So she would also look at the programs and what kind of numbers they have. And then my dad was more worried about the culture side of it.

During their searches, the parents often brought in different perspectives, but always around the idea of supporting and encouraging the students. After taking college visits and having conversations about the choices they were making as they narrowed down their options, the students genuinely cared about the thoughts and opinions of their parents.

Some of the students in this study had parents who went to college, whereas others parents did not. First-generation students often lack accurate and thorough information on the college admission and enrollment process when compared with students who have had family members attend college (Bell et al., 2009). Regardless of their previous college enrollment, the parents of the students in this study were engaged and influential in the students' college searches. The students who indicated they were first-generation college students relied more heavily on their communications with their admission counselors to help walk them through the admission process, with a specific emphasis on financial aid and what specific steps they needed to take to enroll and cover the costs of their attendance.

Significance of Perna's College Choice Model on This Research

Perna's College Choice Model (2006) served as the conceptual framework for this study. Throughout the planning and interview processes, I was able to successfully utilize this model to focus on the various levels that impact a student's ultimate college choice. Prior to this study, Perna's model had been utilized for a variety of small populations of students going through their college searches or elements related to a student's college search (Bell et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2016; Engberg, 2012; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Jayakumar et al., 2013; Nienhusser et al., 2016; Wolniak & Engberg, 2007), but never studies specifically examining the Division III prospective student-athlete search. Despite not being utilized previously for this population, Perna's model

served as an effective framework as I went through the interviews and focus group with these students.

Access to Resources and Social Capital

Across the first and second layers of Perna's College Choice model, she discussed the impact of social capital and the availability of resources for students during their college searches. The model focuses the examination of a student's college search and choice on a situational context that is influenced by their social capital, among other elements (Perna, 2006). There is no one set path for college search and selection among students; the process varies among students based upon their resources, knowledge, and how they weigh the costs and benefits of their college educations (Perna, 2006). A non-athlete going through their college search has resources at home, at school, and through their social networks; the level of knowledge each of these resources has and their impact on the college search will vary across students. "The availability of the types of social capital that promote college choice may be manifested through information about college and assistance from school officials with college-choice processes" (Perna, 2006, p. 139). Prospective Division III student-athletes have those same resources and potential social capital, but their status as athletic recruits provides them with additional resources and social capital from the coaches that they work with during high school. These increased resources provide the prospective student-athletes support and insights that other students may not have as they progress through their searches and make decisions about where to attend college. The level of support and guidance from coaches varied across the students in this study, but they all had the additional access that non-athletes would lack during their college searches.

Perna's model indicates that students can receive social capital through the support they receive at their high school (2006). In addition to the support from high school coaches, the involvement of the college coaches in the recruitment process also provided these students with additional support from the colleges. A non-student-athlete would likely have one main point of contact with an institution as they are going through their college search; these student-athletes, however, had access to coaches and admission contacts during their processes. The students spoke about the ability to quickly text their coaches for urgent questions they had about the schools or the process, which was often their first option over going through email communications with the admission office. The coaches were also able to provide helpful information about the schools, deadlines, and other processes that other students may not be receiving at the same rate during their college searches. Access to this type of information in this way impacts how a student experiences the process of their college search.

Marketing and Recruitment

College marketing and recruitment falls under the third layer of Perna's College Choice model, Higher Education Context. The marketing an institution implements supports and enhances student perceptions of the institution related to their location and specific characteristics in comparison with competitor institutions (Perna, 2006). As students go through their college searches, they experience marketing and recruitment from a variety of channels and outlets. A specific channel that colleges utilize to provide information to prospective students is through a viewbook that is sent to the homes of students from an admission office (Klassen, 2001). Institutions will also utilize their website (Del Vecchio, 2017) or social media (Brown et al., 2016) to connect with students. For a non-student-athlete, the recruitment is centered around the admission office and their specific admission counselor. Some students may also receive

outreach from a faculty member from their intended major or a current student on campus, but the admission office carries most of the load for the outreach methods to recruit a student. For student-athletes, however, the marketing and recruitment efforts they experience also originate with the coaches and the athletic departments.

Within this study, I learned that the admission office is mostly seen as a secondary source of recruitment for the prospective student-athletes who participated in interviews. The role of the admission office is mostly transactional, as the student will work with them for the application and financial aid processes, but the athletic department, team, and coach are responsible for most of their recruitment, and to some extent, the marketing that attracts them also focuses on athletics. The perceived authenticity of social media allows students to connect with an institution beyond what they are receiving electronically or through the mail (Brown et al., 2016). For the students in my study, the institution accounts lacked the same authenticity that team-specific social accounts offered. It is important to understand the difference in perspectives between a prospective student-athlete and a non-athlete as the admission offices consider their interactions with the students. An admission office will often attempt to gauge student interest based on how often they interact with the office, but with student-athletes they may be interacting with the coach every day despite not having regular communications with the admission counselor. It is also important to know the role of the coach so they can speak holistically to the student experience and benefits of being a student at their institution.

Expected Benefits and Costs

A central component of Perna's College Choice model that results from the factors across her four layers is the expected benefits and costs that students have for attending college overall, and for attending a specific institution. All students evaluate what is important to them and the

expected costs and benefits of going to college within their own context (Perna, 2006). Prospective student-athletes have an additional layer of consideration throughout their college searches that will influence their expected benefits and costs for attending a specific college or university.

As prospective student-athletes consider attending a college or university as a student-athlete, an expected benefit is to continue to play their sport beyond high school. These students must also consider the potential expected costs on their health and time management. The students within my study also talked about the expected benefits or costs associated with the locations of colleges they were considering as that would impact the ability of parents and/or other family members to attend their games. This is a consideration that would not exist for non-student-athletes. The students within my study did not spend a lot of time speaking to the specific locations and did not indicate that it was a significant factor for them. However, each of the students were considering Division III institutions that fell within a two-hour radius of their high schools.

The students in this study also described how coaches have different abilities in helping the students understand the expected benefits of being a student-athlete at their school over other schools. These conversations are often about study tables and other support mechanisms in place to help the students be successful in the classroom. The support systems in place were not considered critical as much as the students simply appreciated knowing there was a focus on academics at the Division III schools they were considering. As students consider playing at a Division III institution versus a higher division, they must weigh the expected benefits of a potential athletic scholarship at a Division I or II school, versus the expected costs of time spent on their sport and a lack of focus on academics. The students in this study had made the decision

that their academics were more important, and the expected benefits of a Division III school outweighed the expected costs.

Implications for Practice

As I explored the college search process for these prospective Division III student-athletes, I spent considerable time reflecting on implications of practice, for both athletic departments and admission offices. The NCAA Division III recruitment guide (2018) encourages athletic departments and admission offices to meet regularly to better align strategies and reinforce messaging for prospective students. Across each of these recommendations, I believe it is important for these two areas to work collaboratively to recruit students. Throughout the conversations I had with students, they indicated that they often relied on the coaches for information, but that oftentimes the coach did not have the specific information they were looking for if it was specific to admissions or financial aid. A collaborative approach may allow the coaches to know additional talking points and will provide them with the knowledge to connect the student with the appropriate person to talk with about their question, as well.

Considerations for Division III Athletic Departments

The presence of a recruitment guide for Division III athletic coaches published by the NCAA highlights the importance of recruitment for athletic coaches and their programs. This study demonstrates the need for coaches to be actively engaged in the recruitment process of their prospective student-athletes. Although each institution, and often each individual sport or coach, may approach recruiting processes slightly differently, there are still key considerations for coaches and athletic departments that emerged from this study. Division III college coaches should highlight the institution and team commitment to student-athletes' academic success,

connect prospective students with current players from their teams, and develop a relationship with the parents throughout the process.

Commitment to Academic Success

All five participants from my study indicated that academics greatly exceeded athletics as they selected schools to consider and narrowed their college choices. Each student indicated that the coaches at their top institutions spent time talking about the importance of academics for their student-athletes. It is important that this is not only a conversation for the students, but that it is demonstrated within the program itself. If a coach or institution is not transparent or authentic during the process, the students from this study were able to identify the discrepancies. The coaches should focus on building partnerships with academic colleagues on their campuses to allow their prospective students to connect with faculty members who will be with the students in the classroom. The students in my study who met with a faculty member during their recruitment process found the interaction helpful in understanding what their academic experience would be like in college. If for no other reason than demonstrating a strong partnership, I think the ability of the coaches to help connect a student with faculty members would be a powerful moment in a student's exploration of that college.

Additionally, the students from this study spoke to their own research into the Division III philosophy, rather than having strong connections made by the coaches at the schools where they were being recruited. NCAA Division III coaches are encouraged to speak to the philosophy of Division III and should be trained at an institutional level to speak to this information (NCAA, 2018). If a coach were to talk about their commitment to academics and highlight examples of this commitment with a connection to the overall Division III philosophy, this could be a powerful recruitment tool for students who are considering athletics at another division. In this

study, two students specifically discussed the comparison between academic focus at a Division II versus a Division III school, and the importance of academics for the students helped them decide to continue exploring Division III schools over their Division II counterparts.

Connect Prospective Students With Current Players From Their Team

As these students sought authentic engagement throughout their college searches with the schools they were considering, one of the most impactful opportunities an institution had was to integrate current students into the process. Students exploring smaller colleges and universities find value in examining their potential classroom and out-of-classroom experience if they were to enroll (Goss et al., 2006); a major part of their experience as a student-athlete will be who they interact with on the team. Prospective student-athletes also value the reputation of the head coach within the programs they are considering (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). If a prospective student can connect with current players and learn about the reputation of the coach among the players on the team, it will provide an authentic perspective.

While the prospective student is on their campus visit, the coach should work to integrate current players into the visit where they can connect with the student and talk about their experiences on the team and at the institution. In order to be the most authentic experience for the prospective student, these interactions would be best utilized if they were to happen without the coach being involved. If a current student is majoring in the same or similar major, that would also be helpful for the prospective student—especially if they were going into a more rigorous program with questions about balancing their academics and being a collegiate athlete.

Aside from connections with current students while on their campus visits, prospective students are also looking to social media to connect with current students and learn about the schools and teams they are considering. According to the NCAA (2018), only a third of coaches

have incorporated social media into their recruitment strategy. The students from this study went on social media to learn about the teams and schools because they saw it as an authentic reflection of what they would experience as a student-athlete. Organic content through social media is valuable to prospective students considering their college options (Brown et al., 2016). Similarly, these students found general social media accounts useful, but they specifically found value in student-driven accounts. A coach should allow student content on their social media channels to enable prospective students to gain insight into the program.

Develop a Relationship With Parents

As athletic coaches work with prospective student-athletes during their college searches, it is important for them to establish and maintain a relationship with the parents or guardians, as well. Parents play a significant role in helping students navigate the college search process (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Paulsen, 1990). The students in this study demonstrated that, while it was their college search, their parents were partners in the process. As partners, the students expected their parents to be involved throughout the process and to provide feedback on campus visits and potential college fit as the students explored their college options. Coaches should consider ways to incorporate parents into their recruitment activities and communications about their program and institution. First-generation students face additional barriers to their enrollment as a result of a lack of knowledge on the process (Bell et al., 2009; Cox, 2016; McDonough, 1994; Perna, 2000), so I believe this involvement is even more important when a student lacks this specific social capital and knowledge about college admissions. While on their campus visit, having the opportunity for the parents to talk with the coach and ask questions that are important to them would demonstrate the coach is willing to engage with the parents, and it would help to address any concerns they may have for their son or daughter. In addition to

providing a chance to connect while on campus, coaches can also work to provide other meaningful engagement opportunities for parents to learn about the program throughout the college search. These connections will help the parents feel more comfortable with that institution.

One specific opportunity for coaches to enhance their relationship with parents is to make sure they are provided with accurate and detailed information about the cost of attendance. Financial aid can be a barrier for students and is often worsened by a lack of early communication about the process (Bell et al., 2009; Braddock & Hua, 2006). At a Division III institution, the student may not receive athletic scholarship money, and the students from my study indicated that their parents often spoke to the cost of attendance at a small, private Division III institution in comparison to a large state school with lower costs before financial aid. The coach may not be the one talking with the parents about cost, but they should work to ensure they have information about the costs early in the process. The students in my study talked about their parents having some involvement in camps they attended; the coach could use their attendance at camps to put together a financial aid session where someone from the school's financial aid office gives a presentation on cost and financial aid for the parents while their student is attending the camp. Financial aid offices do these types of parent presentations throughout the year at various events, so they would have a presentation they could provide that would allow parents to understand the financial aid opportunities earlier in the process, instead of waiting for the financial aid offers that come in the middle of the student's senior year. The coach helping to set this session up during a camp would highlight that they recognize the influence cost has on college decisions and demonstrate a commitment to transparency throughout the process.

Considerations for Division III Admission Offices

The information collected and analyzed throughout my research process highlighted that admission offices can work strategically with prospective student-athletes throughout their college searches. While the head coach was a critical factor for the prospective student-athletes, and the coach is not someone the admission office has control over, there were other significant factors in the college search where the admission office could help influence their searches and ultimate college decisions. Specifically, there are three key considerations for Division III admission offices that came out of this study: streamline communications in a personal and efficient manner, provide comprehensive information to prospective student-athletes, and ensure a meaningful campus visit experience while the student in on campus.

Streamline Communications

Recruitment and marketing efforts may be presented to prospective students in a passive or apparent manner (Perna, 2006). During my conversations with the students throughout my study, they saw a significant difference between the communications received from coaches and what admission offices were sending. The recruitment and marketing done by an admission office was seen as more apparent, whereas the students felt a genuine connection with coaches and did not even notice the marketing or recruitment strategies being implemented. Rather than finding information useful and links to the website helpful, the students found the inundation of statistics and facts from an admission office to be overwhelming and insincere. Even the emails that were structured to be sent from an admission counselor or other specific person still were too generic to make the students excited about the outreach. To prevent students from deleting emails before reading or marking them as spam, admission offices should focus on how they can personalize their outreach to speak specifically to why that student would be a good fit at their

school and why the school is excited about that individual student considering their institution. Schools can streamline these communications by focusing on singular messages within their emails that prompt dialogue with the admission counselors, rather than driving the students to the website, an application, or some other form to complete.

Provide Comprehensive Information

As students begin to narrow their college options, they are looking for more information about the schools that help them differentiate their options (Hossler & Gallaher, 1987). The students in this study spoke to a desire for clear and concise information, but they still wanted enough information where they could learn about the schools that they were considering during their recruitment processes. Throughout any student's college search, they will have opportunities and resources, along with barriers that come up along the way (Brown et al., 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016); effective communication from the admission office can help students understand and navigate barriers that arise. During an analysis of recruitment emails, the students in this study highlighted that they found emails with links directing them to places on the website to be counterproductive. College admission offices should focus on giving students key targeted messages about all elements of campus life that may be important for the student, thereby helping to synthesize and streamline the volume of information that could be found on a website.

Even though the student is working with the athletic coaches, admission offices should still focus on communicating relevant academic and student life information. Prospective student-athletes care about academic programs and why an academic program would be the right fit for them (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Mansfield & Warwick, 2005; Reynolds, 2006), even if their main contact at the institution is with a coach. In addition to sending this information to students, college admission offices should continue to help students

find and develop meaningful relationships across campus, even outside of the athletic programs. Faculty and other staff members are important contacts for prospective students to develop relationships with while being recruited (Mansfield & Warwick, 2005). The students in this study highlighted the value they saw in connecting with faculty and staff during their visits to campuses. The admission office should also establish a method for current students to provide information on their experiences to prospective students.

Similarly, admission offices should focus on providing detailed and student-specific information for students on financial aid processes and cost implications. Institutions attempt to highlight affordability during their recruitment of students (Lillis & Tian, 2008). However, the conversations with the students in this study highlighted that those marketing strategies often do not extend to early conversations about what that means for the student specifically. Hossler et al. (1999) described that cost becomes more important for students as they process throughout their college search. The students in this study indicated that cost was not an initial main consideration, but they still looked for transparency and information on cost early in their college searches.

During my focus group with the students from this study, a conversation occurred between the students where two students talked about the support and guidance received from their admission counselors; the two students who had not had this experience indicated that this type of guidance would have been helpful for them, as well. The students described a relationship where their admission counselors were trying to help them navigate the complex financial aid process, and representation for their own college was sometimes even secondary in the conversation as the counselors worked specifically to meet the needs of those students. Despite not always actively selling the schools or recruiting the students, the positive impact on

the counselors' relationships with the students helped improve the students' overall perception of the universities.

Ensure a Meaningful Campus Visit Experience

Campus visits are critical to the college search process as they provide insight into the physical campus and the overall campus environment to prospective students (Johnston, 2010; Secore, 2018a). As the students in this study discussed their visit experiences, they appreciated seeing the physical spaces on campus, but they also had a heightened focus on the interactions they saw between campus community members and how their own interactions with those people unfolded, as well. Often, students are visiting a campus through a scheduled visit with the athletic office, but each of the students talked about the importance of time spent with the admission office. While a student is on campus, the admission office should focus on establishing, building, and maintaining a relationship with the student and whoever is on their visit with them.

Admission offices should focus on providing accurate and relevant information that is useful in helping a student understand the benefits of enrolling at the school, but the admission counselor should also focus on getting to know the student, answering their questions, and highlighting why that specific student would be a good fit for their school. Similarly, the student giving the tour, if one is given by the admission office, should be coached to have similar conversations. The tour, and the tour guide, provide a unique opportunity to utilize storytelling to highlight the unique features of the campus (Moogan et al., 1999; Secore, 2018a, 2018b). The admission counselor should acknowledge the athletic recruitment process, but not focus simply on athletics with the student. Rather, the counselor should take the time to understand all the student's interests and align each of them with what the university can offer.

Implications for Theory and Scholarship

As I examined college choice models prior to this study, I appreciated the multi-layer approach that was contained within Perna's (2006) Model of Student College Choice, along with the inclusion of human capital investment and sociological approaches. Each of the layers of Perna's model, along with the ability to integrate a student's context into the process, made it a useful lens from which to examine the college search that each of the students in this study described. The breadth of Perna's (2006) Model of Student College choice allows it to be flexible for various student populations that are being examined throughout a college search process.

Engberg and Gilbert (2014) utilized Perna's College Choice Model (2006) to demonstrate the significance of school counselors on college preparation for student athletes; similar research has not been conducted on the impact of high school coaches on college culture established on their teams. As each student spoke about their college search, one of the first items mentioned by every student related to help or assistance they received during the process by a current coach. Numerous studies highlight how the coach recruiting a student is an influential factor, but no research focused specifically on the role and impact of current coaches. When examining this through the lens of Perna's (2006) College Choice Model, the current coach will fall into the social capital element but may also provide some resources that fall within the second layer of the model.

Aside from the student characteristics that impact the amount of influence a coach may have, the characteristics of the coach may also impact the level of that influence; not all coaches have the same background and experiences to help with the process. Within my study, the student coaches had various experiences that ranged from a current Division III coach through a

coach who did not have any connections to Division III athletics. Having access to a coach for support and guidance provides additional social capital; however, the level in which that support can be useful falls onto a continuum and is not consistent across teams or coaches. While this presents a challenge in assessing social capital at a surface level, it is not unique to student-athletes; simply having a school counselor does also not guarantee the same level of support and guidance. Additional depth of analysis would be needed to assess potential variances in equity that impact the level of support that social capital may or may not provide across various contexts.

Overall, I believe Perna's (2006) model was an effective tool throughout this study. After thoughtful analysis of her model within the framework of college athletes, an area where the model lacked fit was within the higher education context. I believe there are too many nuances within this context that could be split into more specific areas to help explore and analyze the various elements within this context. While the model is designed to be broad, this area seems excessively broad when examining college choice for a specific population like prospective student athletes. For student-athletes, they are dealing with marketing and recruitment that exceeds standard efforts that other students receive; as indicated throughout this study, their interpretation of, and response to, these efforts are significantly different than to the general efforts of the institution. Additionally, within the social, economic, and policy context, these prospective student-athletes are navigating their searches with additional policies and regulations put in place by the NCAA. Despite these two areas where the model could be more focused, I believe the breadth of the model allows for the search process of prospective Division III student-athletes to fall into the scope of the model.

Future Research Recommendations

The research within this dissertation provided useful information for admission offices, athletic departments, and coaches to consider when recruiting prospective Division III student-athletes. While the information can assist college administrators in their recruitment and enrollment efforts for these students, additional information could be gathered through other studies related to the prospective Division III student-athlete experience. In my conversations with each of the students involved in this study, they spoke about the role of a coach or coaches that helped them better understand the athletic recruitment process. Additional research could be conducted to examine this relationship more closely in an attempt to understand the impact of the high school coach on the college recruitment process, and the student preparedness to be recruited to play at the collegiate level. Similarly, the collective approach to the recruitment process with the students' parents highlights that more could be done to examine the parent/guardian role in the recruitment process. Within this study, I spoke with high school seniors who were approximately halfway through their senior years. They were able to reflect on their college searches throughout high school, though additional research could be conducted that follows a student during their college search beginning earlier in high school. This type of research would allow the researcher to analyze how the various college choice factors for a prospective Division III student-athlete evolve and change throughout their search.

More research could also be conducted at the collegiate level to examine the recruitment and enrollment process for Division III institutions. During the focus group, we spent 20 minutes discussing four sample admission office emails, and the students were able to provide thoughts and feedback on their initial reactions to them. They also drew helpful connections with emails they received during their recruitment experiences. Further research could be conducted to

closely examine the effectiveness of recruitment and outreach methods from college admission offices. Similarly, I believe a case study to focus on the recruitment practices from one institution could be conducted to explore the various efforts across the recruitment cycle. My study was done from the student perspective, so I was able to hear about information received and their interactions with several schools during their college searches. I believe further study would provide a unique perspective if conducted from the viewpoint of a single institution and their various outreach, marketing, and recruitment efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided useful information related to a prospective Division III student-athlete's college search and which factors are important to them as they navigate the process. Utilizing Perna's College Choice model was an effective way to organize and analyze the data received from these students. In utilizing Perna's model, I was able to succinctly identify how these students experienced their college searches and what was important to them. It also helped me as I structured the interview guide for both the interviews and the focus group. These prospective Division III student-athletes shared information highlighting that academics were the main driving force behind their college searches. Additionally, once a student determined a school had their intended major, the coach was the most influential factor as they narrowed their options and looked to make a college decision. These students also gave insight into the prospective Division III athlete experience of determining whether playing sports in college would be best for them and, if so, determining which division to pursue as part of their process. This study also highlighted that the students' parents were important in providing students feedback and sharing their concerns throughout the search. This feedback was important and impactful for each of these students. Finally, this study demonstrated the importance of

authenticity throughout the recruitment process and that each of the students valued hearing

about the student-athlete experience firsthand from students, faculty, and coaches who they

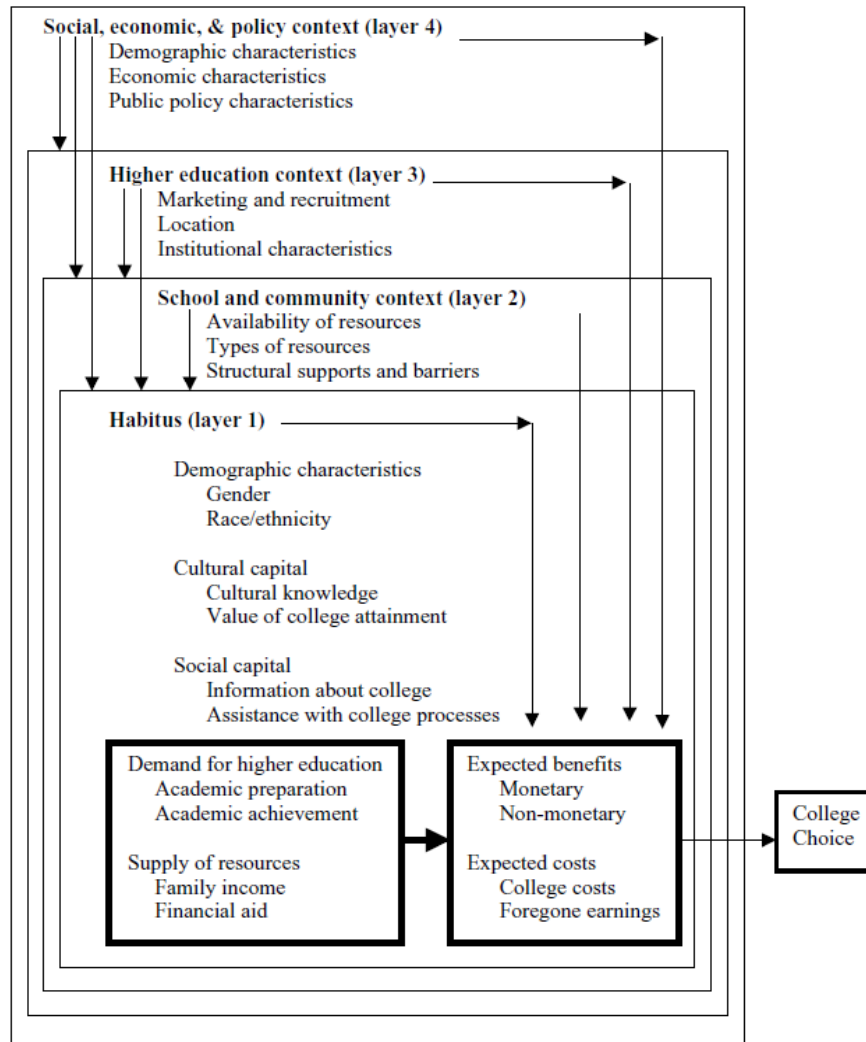would be interacting with every day if they chose to enroll.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PERNA'S (2006, p. 117) CONCEPTUAL COLLEGE CHOICE MODEL

Appendix A

Perna's (2006, p. 117) Conceptual College Choice Model

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Student Interview

I) INTRODUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONS:

Hello, my name is Eric Young and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program. Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study as I explore the thoughts and experiences of prospective Division III student athletes throughout their college search.

As mentioned previously, I will be interviewing several participants individually to learn about your college search before conducting a focus group with all participants. Before we get into the interview, I would like to review the informed consent that you and your parents signed previously.

[FOR FACILITATOR: REVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM AND ANSWER ANY

QUESTIONS ABOUT IT.]

Use of Tape Recorder:

- As you will recall, this interview will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what you say throughout our conversation.

- I will maintain all tapes and transcripts will within a locked document on an external hard-drive.

- A transcription company that has agreed to confidentiality will be creating the transcript of our conversation today

- Your name will be scrubbed from transcripts; the pseudonym determined for you throughout this study is how you will be identified once the transcript has been received.

- If you use abbreviations or acronyms, I ask that you say the full name at least once to aid transcription.

II) Interview:

1. How many colleges are you currently considering for next year?

    a. How many schools did you initially consider?

    b. What has the process looked like to narrow this list?

2. Can you talk about the first moments you remember thinking about wanting to attend college?

    a. What were some of your initial thoughts during this time?

    b. How did you decide that pursing a Division III institution for athletics was the right path for you?

3. Tell me about your college search.

    a. How would you describe the interactions you have had with the colleges you are considering?

    b. What role has your high school (or employees at the high school) had on your college search thus far?

    c. How do you gain information about the colleges you are considering?

4. What factors are most important for you when you think about where you want to attend college?

    a. How did you identify these factors of importance?

    b. How do you compare the athletic versus academic environments as you think about your college decision?

    c. Who do you talk to the most about what is important to you when selecting an institution?

5. How do you plan to/have you organize(d) your college search throughout your senior year?

    a. What are you most afraid of throughout your college search?

b. Who will be the influential people in your decision-making process?

6. What else do you think is important for me to know about your college search at this point in your search?

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol

<u>Student Focus Group</u>

I) INTRODUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONS:

Hello, my name is Eric Young, and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education
Administration program. Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study as I explore the
thoughts and experiences of prospective Division III student athletes throughout their college
search.
As mentioned previously, I have interviewed several participants individually to learn about your
college search before conducting this focus group with all participants. Before we get into the
focus group, I would like to review the informed consent that you and your parents/guardians
signed previously.

[FOR FACILITATOR: REVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM AND ANSWER ANY

QUESTIONS ABOUT IT.]

Use of Tape Recorder:

- As you will recall, this focus group will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce

  the chance of misinterpreting what you say throughout our conversation.

- I will maintain all tapes and transcripts will within a locked document on an external

  hard-drive.

- A transcription company that has agreed to confidentiality will be creating the transcript

  of our conversation today

- Your name will be scrubbed from transcripts; the pseudonym determined for you

  throughout this study is how you will be identified once the transcript has been received.

- If you use abbreviations or acronyms, I ask that you say the full name at least once to aid

  transcription.

II) Focus Group Questions:

1. Before we start- can we all go around the "room" and introduce ourselves?

    a. Name and sport you are being recruited for

2. We all spoke for about 45 minutes about your college searches…

    a. How would you describe your interactions with the following people at the institutions you are considering?

        i. Admission Staff

        ii. Coaching Staff

        iii. Faculty and other campus staff

            1. How many of you met/talked to faculty during your search so far?

            2. How do you view the importance of your relationship with faculty to your relationship with coaches?

    b. I heard a few stories about some negative coach interactions, but I am curious to hear more. Can you tell me a little about some negative or bad interactions you've had with a coach or anyone else from a college or university?

3. Do you have any events or activities that you have deemed to be significant milestones in your college search? What was significant about them?

    a. Has your college search been impacted by the move to test optional for many colleges and universities for fall 2021?

4. How would you describe the outreach from colleges and universities throughout your college search?

    a. What types of communication do you feel is most helpful?

    b. I am going to show several admission offices emails … take a moment to read through the emails.

       i. Do these look like the types of emails that you have been receiving?

       ii. What are your thoughts on them?

       iii. Which one is the most appealing to you? Why?

5. From our conversations, you all indicated that your parents have had some involvement in your college search.

    a. Has their involvement changed throughout the course of your college search?

    b. Is there anything you wish was different about their involvement? More involved, less involved?

    c. How do you handle differing opinions with your parents as you explore your college options?

6. All of you have visited colleges throughout your college search. How could these visits have been more effective in helping you during your search?

7. How helpful have the colleges and universities you are exploring been with the financial aid process?

    a. FAFSA Assistance?

    b. Talking through what your cost will be after financial aid?

8. What other factors do you believe have contributed to your progression so far within your college search?

9. The NCAA provides a recruitment guide for coaches that highlights the importance of collaboration in recruitment. Do you feel like the schools that are recruiting you have collaboration among coaches and admission offices?

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