

Comparing College Choice Factors in Student Athletes vs. Non-Student Athletes

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a difference between student athletes and non-student athletes' factors for deciding to attend a small liberal arts college in Maryland. The students were given a survey to rate 10 factors as "very important, somewhat important, not important, and N/A" to their decision to attend the college. This study concluded that there was no difference in ratings for factors more general to the college, but factors that were more specific to the athletic department, showed to be much more important to the student athletes. Research in this area should continue, so the college is aware of what continues to bring both student athletes and non-student athletes to campus.

CHAPTER I

OVERVIEW

There are many different things to look at in a college when a student is trying to make their college choice. For people looking to play a sport, athletics is one more factor that needs to be taken into consideration. It is important for each school to know what their strengths and weaknesses are, as seen through the eyes of their student body.

This can be a problem if your school or program is struggling to get and retain recruits. If you can get an idea from your current students or student athletes of why they chose to come to your school in the first place, you may be able to find a solution to this problem.

Coaches should be interested in what the reasons are that their athletes choose to attend that school to play their respective sport. By finding this out, coaches and their staff can make sure they show the potential student athlete the good things that they might like about the college. By figuring out what the things are that student athletes like about their chosen school, coaches and administrator can also find out what can be improved upon.

Statement of Problem

The point of this study is to determine what the important factors are that draw student athletes (those who are playing a varsity sport) to attend a private liberal arts college in Towson, Maryland, and if those factors are different from non-athletes (those who are not playing a varsity sport).

Hypothesis

Student-athletes and non-student-athletes will rate each factor equally important to why they chose this specific private, liberal arts college.

Operational Definitions

The variables in this case are the factors such as facilities, location, major, cost, communication with coaches and interaction with players. Facilities, in this sense, has more to do with athletic facilities, such as the gym, field, weight room, locker rooms, but it could also include the general facilities of the college like academic buildings and residence halls as well. The location of the college, major, and cost, are all easier to define. Communication with coaches could be through email, phone call, text message, or in person conversation, and could include the coach coming to see athletes play also. Interactions with players would happen more on the recruiting visit to the school. This is where the prospective student athlete would meet players who are currently a part of the program to see if they get along and what the potential team chemistry could be. These factors would be considered the dependent variables. The independent variable is a student's athletic status, either playing a NCAA varsity sport, or not playing a NCAA varsity sport.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many deciding factors that go into choosing a college. This will be one of the most important decisions that a person makes in his or her life. The college decision process for student athletes specifically can be very time consuming and very difficult. A variety of different factors play into a prospective student athlete choosing which college to attend, because it can be up to a four year commitment not only to the school but to a team as well. It is important for college or university administration to know what the most important things are to their students not only to help bring them in, but to keep them there.

Since the student-athlete is recruited for both academics and athletics, the same factors that are important for the general student population, may not be the same. This literature review looks at the different factors that influence a student athlete's choice in a college or university at all Divisions, and community college. It will also break down the choice differences in males and females, domestic and international, and the general student body.

Student Athlete College Choice Throughout Different Divisions (NCAA Division I, II, and III and NJCAA)

NCAA Division I

There are three different divisions of college athletics at the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), Division I, II, and III. At the Division I level, the recruitment of student-athletes differs, because of the ability to give athletic scholarships to players, and the high revenue sports such as football and basketball. Factors such as

these could potentially play a large factor in a student athlete's choice on what school to attend. Klenosky, Templin, and Troutman (2001) examined a sample of 27 NCAA Division I football players, and what they perceived to be the most important in their decision making process. The most frequent and most influential attribute, was the coach and/or coaching staff. The reasons being, the coach/coaching staff made the athlete feel comfortable, helped them enjoy their time at school, aided them in developing their skills, and they are the ones who determine playing time. Vermillion and Spears (2012), also found that 94%, out of 101 Division I athletes surveyed, said that the coaching staff was extremely or very important, and 86.2% said that the amount of financial aid/scholarship offers were extremely or very important as well.

Another contributing factor for a Division I student-athlete's college choice is the athletic related scholarships or financial aid that they receive from the school. Schneider and Messenger (2012) surveyed 9 Division I men's hockey players of all years (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) with different degrees of athletic financial aid. "The student-athletes on full scholarship had, as their most influential factor, athletic-related financial aid" in front of other things such as the opportunity to play right away, location, and coaching staff. "Athletic-related financial aid was also the number one (tied) factor for those receiving partial athletic scholarships" (p. 807).

Athletes that compete at a high level in Division I athletics have the potential to make a living from their talents after they leave school, and play professionally. For basketball, specifically men's, there are many opportunities to continue playing once they leave college, whether that be overseas or the NBA. Ryan, Groves, and Schneider (2007) sought to understand how and why the decisions were made to attend certain schools by

basketball players. The main worries of the athletes were concerns for the future, relationships, and productivity, which helped to indicate that success in the future is very important when deciding what college to attend.

NCAA Division II

NCAA Division II athletics are similar to both Division I and Division III, but in different ways. Division II schools are permitted to give partial scholarships. “Very few of the 110,000 student-athletes competing in Division II will receive a full athletics grant that covers all of their expenses, but most of them will receive some athletics-based financial aid to help them through school” (NCAA, 2016). However, there are less Division II schools than both Division I and III, for a student athlete to choose from.

In a study by Pauline (2010), he examined the factors that influence the college selection of NCAA Division I, II, and III lacrosse players. The participants of this study were 792 male and female athletes, 30.6% of Division II, who played NCAA lacrosse for teams located in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States. Student athletes from Division II lacrosse teams, viewed academics to be more important than those of Division I, and they also viewed the coaching staff as more significant than the Division III athletes.

NCAA Division III

NCAA Division III athletics, “features student-athletes who receive no financial aid related to their athletic ability and athletic departments are staffed and funded like any other department in the university” (NCAA, 2016). Goss, Jubenvillen and Orejan (2006), used the Student-Athlete College Choice Profile Scale to examine scores from freshman student athletes and found that the most influential factor was degree programs offered,

second was the opportunity to play, third was the head coach, and fourth was the academic support services. There were similar findings in the study done by Pauline (2010), stating that the academics factors of a college were more influential to Division III athletes then it was for Division I. This could be due to the fact that student-athletes in Division III know that their athletic career is most likely going to be over after college, so they want to make sure they are ready for the next step in their lives by getting a good education.

NJCAA

The NJCAA (National Junior College Athletic Association) is made up of 501 two year institutions that are also separated across three divisions. These divisions are similar to the NCAA in which Division I “may grant full athletic scholarships (tuition, books, fees, room & board), up to \$250 in course required supplies and transportation costs on time per academic year to and from the college by direct route,” and each sport has a limit on the number of athletic scholarships that can be given (NJCAA, 2016). In Division II, colleges may grant athletic scholarships, however they are limited to “tuition, books, fees and up to \$250 in course required supplies,” and each sport also has a limit on the number of athletic scholarships that can be given (NJCAA, 2016). And like the NCAA, NJCAA Division III colleges cannot give any athletic scholarships.

There have been many studies done that have looked at what influenced student athletes to choose a four year institution, however it is important to also look at what influences athletes to choose a two year community college. In a study done by Vermillion (2010), he looks to determine what factors are the most important to community college softball players when choosing the school they are currently at.

Participants of the study included both scholarship players and non-scholarship players; 84.9% reported that they were recruited and offered a scholarship. There were five factors that were most important for these community college softball players, which were “head coach, availability of academic program or major, the social atmosphere of the team, career opportunities after graduation, and the cost of college, respectively” (p. 8).

Student Athlete College Choice Based on Specific Demographics

Male vs. Female

There are many studies that also look at the difference in college choice between males and females to see if there is a difference in influential factors when choosing a college. In the study done by Goss et al., (2006) they broke down their research further to compare male and female responses of what were the most significant factors in their college choice. They found that male and female athletes were influenced by very similar factors when choosing a college, and there were only differences in the ranking. For male student-athletes, the head coach was the most influential factor, and for female student-athletes, degree programs were the most influential, while opportunity to play and academic support services were also important.

Braddock II, Lv, and Dawkins (2008) looked at the influence of college athletic reputation on college choice among African American high school seniors, and found that success in sports such as football and men’s basketball, helps to increase the number of applications that a college receives. This means that it is valid to research whether or not the athletic reputation of a college has any influence on a student-athlete’s college decision. They found that African American female seniors who participate in athletics

are more likely to find college athletics important, than those who did not play high school varsity sports, and the African American female seniors who place great importance on strong academics, are much less likely to place importance on the athletic reputation of a college. Like females, African American male seniors that participate in high school athletics are much more likely to place importance on athletic reputation when choosing a college, however they are more than eight times more likely than African American non-athletes to place importance on collegiate athletic reputation and success.

International vs. Domestic (Division I)

There are student athletes that come to the United States from other countries to play their respective sports. Popp, Pierce and Hums (2011) compared the responses of international and domestic student-athletes, to see if there was a difference in factors that contributed to college choice. They found a difference in the most important factors for international and domestic student athletes. “The top five most important items for domestic student-athletes were: (a) a degree from school leading to a good job, (b) overall reputation of school, (c) the level of competition at which team competes, (d) getting to know other members of the team, and (e) personality of the head coach. For international student-athletes, the five items rated highest for level of importance were: (a) the value of athletic scholarship offered, (b) the personality of head coach, (c) a degree from school leading to a good job, (d) the level of competition at which team competes, and (e) the academic reputation of school” (p. 181). This shows that the top two responses for international student-athletes were athletic related, rather than for domestic student-athletes, their top two responses were more related to academics.

General Student Population

It is important to look at the influences of choosing a college to the general student population as well, to see how much, or if, it differs from students that plan to participate in athletics at the collegiate level. Lillis and Tian (2008), found that the students were the most influenced by tuition and location, however they also found the availability of a certain major, academic reputation of the school, quality of the faculty, and opportunity to be placed in a good job after graduation, very important as well. Along with those aspects related to academics, it was also found that students are influenced by school size, environment of the campus, availability of sports, size of classes, dorm life, ratio of male/female, friends, safety and diversity on campus.

From looking at previous studies of the factors that influence a student athlete to choose a school, and the factors that influence the general student population to choose a school, they are similar, however the major differences seem to be the order of importance. For the general student population, they do not place as much emphasis on athletics as a student that would be attending a school to play a sport along with getting their education.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

This study is a quasi-experimental study to determine and compare the determining factors of a student athlete, and non-student athlete choosing to attend a private, liberal arts college in Towson, Maryland. This study uses descriptive and inferential statistics taken from responses from both student athletes and non-student athletes on the college campus. The independent variable is the student's athletic status, either playing a NCAA varsity sport, or not playing a NCAA varsity sport. The dependent variables are facilities, residence halls, location, academic resources, major, cost, communication with coaches, and interaction with current players on the team.

Participants

The participants in this study are student athletes at this specific college, and non-student athletes (students who are not playing a team sport). The ages of these students range from 17-22 years of age.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a survey, listing a number of factors that would contribute to choosing a school. Participants were asked to rate the factors by importance (very important, somewhat important, not important, or N/A).

Procedure

Surveys were distributed to student athletes in the sports and recreation center at the college, from a wide variety of sports. Surveys were then distributed to non-student athletes in the library. All students were instructed to fill out the survey anonymously.

The responses from the survey were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. This file was imported into the statistics package Stata-13.1 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, Revision 16 Dec 2016). The categorical scale responses to each survey question were compared for the students playing a team sport and the students not playing a team sport using the Chi-square statistic.

A copy of the survey is included in Appendix A of this paper. The survey was pretested on three student athletes and three non-student athletes to make sure the items and accompanying scales were unambiguous.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to find out if the factors that contributed to a student athlete choosing to attend a small liberal arts college, differed from that of a non-student athlete. Fifty student athletes, and fifty non-student athletes completed a survey rating ten factors as very important, somewhat important, not important, or N/A, in their decision to attend the college.

The tables below present data about the students who participated in the study, and how they rated each factor and its importance to their choosing to attend this college.

The breakdown of male and female athletes and non-athletes are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Male and Female Athletes and Non-Athletes in the Study

Play sport	Gender			Total
	Male	Female	Not say	
Athlete	27	23	0	50
Non-athlete	11	38	1	50
Total	38	61	1	100

The breakdown of male athletes by sport is summarized in Table 2, and female athletes in Table 3.

Table 2

Male Athletes by Sport

Sport played	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Basketball	14	51.85	51.85
Tennis	5	18.52	70.37
Lacrosse	4	14.81	85.19
XC & Track	2	7.41	92.59
Soccer	1	3.70	96.30
Swimming	1	3.70	100.00
Total	27	100.00	

Table 3

Female Athletes by Sport

Sport played	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Basketball	6	26.09	26.09
Lacrosse	5	21.74	47.83
Swimming	4	17.39	65.22
XC & Track	4	17.39	82.61
Volleyball	2	8.70	91.30
Soccer	1	4.35	95.65
Tennis	1	4.35	100.00
Total	23	100.00	

Tables 4-13 show the comparisons between the responses of student athletes and non-student athletes when asked to rate residence halls, dining services on campus, location, academic resources, major, cost, facilities, success of athletics, communication with coaches, and interaction with players on the team as very important, somewhat important, not important, or N/A.

Table 4***Residence Halls***

Play sport	Residence halls				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	9	26	12	3	50
Non-athlete	5	21	18	6	50
Total	14	47	30	9	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 3.8748 Pr = 0.275

Table 5***Dining Services on Campus***

Play sport	Food services				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	16	27	7	0	50
Non-athlete	16	20	10	4	50
Total	32	47	17	4	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 5.5720 Pr = 0.134

Table 6***Location***

Play sport	Location				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	34	14	1	1	50
Non-athlete	34	14	1	1	50
Total	68	28	2	2	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 0.0000 Pr = 1.000

Table 7***Academic Resources***

Play sport	Academic resources				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	17	17	15	1	50
Non-athlete	18	19	11	2	50
Total	35	36	26	3	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 1.0884 Pr = 0.780

Table 8***Major***

Play sport	Major				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	32	13	4	1	50
Non-athlete	35	13	1	1	50
Total	67	26	5	2	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 1.9343 Pr = 0.586

Table 9***Cost***

Play sport	Cost			Total
	Very	Some	Not	
Athlete	28	17	5	50
Non-athlete	28	18	4	50
Total	56	35	9	100

Pearson chi2(2) = 0.1397 Pr = 0.933

Table 10***Facilities***

Play sport	Facilities				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	25	20	4	1	50
Non-athlete	3	20	23	4	50
Total	28	40	27	5	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 32.4561 Pr = 0.000

Table 11***Success of Athletics***

Play sport	Athletic success				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	14	25	10	1	50
Non-athlete	1	5	39	5	50
Total	15	30	49	6	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 44.4299 Pr = 0.000

Table 12***Communication with Coaches***

Play sport	Communication				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	31	15	3	1	50
Non-athlete	0	2	28	20	50
Total	31	17	31	21	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 78.2929 Pr = 0.000

Table 13

Interaction with Players on the Team

Play sport	Interaction				Total
	Very	Some	Not	N/A	
Athlete	37	8	4	1	50
Non-athlete	0	4	28	18	50
Total	37	12	32	19	100

Pearson chi2(3) = 71.5439 Pr = 0.000

In Table 14 we see the results of the null hypothesis test between athletes and non-athletes rating importance of the 10 factors. The Pearson’s Chi-square calculates to what degree the ratings of importance depend on whether students play varsity sports at a small liberal arts college. The Chi-square statistic analyzes the difference between the information that was gathered from the survey and the theoretical frequencies that the ratings were equally important for athletes and non-athletes. When the discrepancy between actual and theoretical frequencies becomes very large, the p-level will be smaller than 0.05, and we can reject the null.

Table 14

Athletes v. Non-Athletes Rating Importance in Choosing this Small Liberal Arts

College

Factor	Chi-Sq	p-level	Result
Residence halls	3.87	0.28	No difference in ratings
Dining services	5.57	0.13	No difference in ratings
Location	0.00	1.00	No difference in ratings
Academic resources	1.09	0.78	No difference in ratings

Major	1.93	0.59	No difference in ratings
Cost	0.14	0.93	No difference in ratings
Facilities	32.46	0.00	More important to athletes
Athletic success	44.43	0.00	More important to athletes
Coach communication	78.29	0.00	More important to athletes
Player interaction	71.54	0.00	More important to athletes

The results for, residence halls, dining services, location, academic resources, major, and cost support the null hypothesis that student athletes and non-student athletes will rate each factor equally important. However, when it came to rating facilities, athletic success, communication with coaches, and interaction with players on the team, those were found to be more important to the student athletes.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study was meant to investigate whether student athletes and non-student athletes' reasons for attending a small, private liberal arts college were the same. The researcher speculated that there would be no difference between student athletes, and non-student athletes' reasoning for choosing to attend the college. The data suggested that there was little to no difference between student athletes' and non-student athletes' rating of residence halls, dining services, academic resources, major, and cost in importance for choosing to attend the college. The questions that were more geared towards athletics such as, facilities, success of athletics, communication with coaches and interactions with players on the team, were much more important to the student athletes rather than the non-student athletes.

Implications of Results

Participants' responses to the survey offer valuable insight for both coaches and college administration about what is important to both the student athlete, and the non-student athlete. This can be useful for coaches and the athletic department to know what prospective student athletes are looking for, to better the recruiting process. For example, in Table 10, the majority of student athletes rated facilities as "very important" or "somewhat important," while for non-student athletes, facilities fell more in the "somewhat important" to "not important" rating.

Theoretical Consequences

From a theoretical standpoint, this study suggests that student athletes at this small liberal arts, Division III college, do not take other factors outside of athletics any lighter than non-student athletes, when choosing to attend the college.

Threats to the Validity

There were several threats to the validity of the results of this study. Internal validity was potentially threatened by the questions included on the survey. The researcher may have left out other important topics that students considered when choosing the college.

The external validity of the results was threatened by the sample size of student athletes taken from the college. The researcher surveyed 50 student athletes, 27 males and 23 females. This threatens the validity, because there are more female student athletes at the school than male student athletes. That means, this may not accurately represent the responses of the student athlete population as a whole. A second threat to the validity, is did the students and student athletes give truthful responses? A large majority of students were surveyed in the library, so they could have rushed through the survey in order to get it done so they can continue doing work

Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature

Given the findings of a previous study by Goss, Jubenvillen and Orejan (2006), where they found that Division III athletes rated one of the most influential factors to picking a school was the head coach. This is similar to this researcher's findings that communication with coaches is very high on the list of importance for a student athlete in choosing the small, Division III, liberal arts college. Similar research was done by

Pauline (2010), who found that the academic factors of a college were more influential to Division III athletes than Division I. This researcher found that major was the third most important factor for student athletes and thirty-four out of fifty student athletes rated academic resources either “very important” or “somewhat important.”

Implications for Future Research

One implication for future research is that this study could be replicated at other universities or colleges that this small liberal arts college competes with to get in student athletes and non-student athletes. Another suggestion, is that this small liberal arts college could run this study every year and collect the responses from the incoming first year class of both student athletes, and non-student athletes, to see if there are differences year to year. The researcher could expand the collection of data and include more in-depth interviews with the students and expand the survey to include other relevant topics. The last implication is that the data collected by the survey can be broken down to show the different responses of males vs. females; student athletes vs. non-student athletes, and the entire collection of male vs. female data.

Conclusion/Summary

Choosing a college or university to attend is a difficult decision. Researching why current students at schools chose that particular place to study, can not only help admissions and administration, but can also help athletic departments. Once coaches know why their student athletes are choosing to attend that specific school, and what is most important to their student athletes, they can try to improve recruiting efforts. While the results of this research showed that there was little to no difference in the rating of more general things about the university such as residence halls, dining services,

academic resources, major, and cost, the factors that were more generalized to athletics like facilities, success of athletics, communication with coaches and interactions with players on the team, were higher on the list of importance to student athletes.

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Appendix A

Circle one: (athlete means you play a varsity sport at XXXXXXXX, non-athlete means you do not)

Athlete Non-Athlete If athlete, what sport? _____

Circle one:

Male Female Prefer not to say

Please rate by importance, the factors that helped you choose to attend XXXXX College.

Circle one:

Residence Halls:

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Dining Services (on-campus food options):

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Location:

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Academic Resources (ACE, Sis, etc.):

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Major:

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Cost:

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Facilities (gym, field, weight room, locker room, etc.):

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Success of athletics:

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Communication with coaches (head coach or assistant coaches):

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Interaction with players on the team:

Very important Somewhat important Not important N/A

Comments (any other factors that helped you decide):