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Midwest University Coach Perspectives on Student-Athlete Recruitment During Unprecedented Disruption

Author Acknowledgement

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Jonah Bradley

Abstract

Recruiting student-athletes is one of the fundamental elements of success for college-level athletic coaches. The COVID-19 pandemic made student-athlete recruitment next to impossible due to restrictions on in-person activities. Utilizing Participatory Action Research (PAR), this study sought to understand the experiences of four athletic coaches in one Midwest college basketball program. Three themes from this study that informed the recruitment process during disruption were: theme 1: traditional recruiting replaced with technology-enabled recruiting, theme 2: inability to engage in person hinders interactions and communication, and theme 3: roster management and player development inconsistent with disruption. This study reveals a need for further exploration of future recruitment policies and procedures with consideration for potential disruptions at the institutional level. Contingency planning and examination of internal practices are critical to maintain some level of operation in the midst of rapid change.

Keywords: COVID-19; Student-Athlete; Recruitment; Organizational Learning Theory; Change

Introduction

University athletic coaches struggle to recruit during the COVID-19 pandemic which forces a need to reimagine athlete recruitment when normal operations are impossible (“College Coach Insights,” 2021). One significant result of the pandemic was the cancellation of athletic events, games, and tournaments across various sports (The Economist, 2020). This far-reaching disruption forcing coaches to develop new ways to communicate with recruits and attract student-athletes to campuses opens a new era in recruitment (Samuel et al., 2020). New methods of communication utilized by college coaches include Zoom, FaceTime, and widespread social media efforts to attract recruits. The significant importance of recruitment on college athletic operations, especially in building competitive programs, is one of the most overwhelming challenges. Understanding coach responses to student-athlete recruitment during a crisis may offer strategies for improvement in recruitment practices.

University coaches evaluate athletes to make assessments to identify viable prospects (“College Recruiting Process,” 2021). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is an organization that governs the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes (Magnusen et al., 2014). Recruiting in the NCAA is a courtship between athletic programs and prospective student-athletes (Posteher, 2020). On March 13, 2020, the NCAA ended in-person recruiting due to public health concerns (Blinder, 2021). This NCAA mandate to cease in-person recruiting

ended on June 1, 2021, 15 months after the initial recruiting shutdown (Calvaruso, 2021). During recruiting dead periods, coaches cannot have in-person contact with student-athletes (Calvaruso, 2021).

The head coach-player relationship is one of the most influential factors in college choices for prospective student-athletes (Magnusen et al., 2014). An adequate level of socialization is not feasible in the virtual environment, leaving coaches and recruits with an inauthentic expression of reality (Posteher, 2020). Many college coaches' frustrations about the inability to recruit students through traditional methods require further exploration of sustainability and contingency methods. This study relies on the engagement of two head coaches and two associate head coaches at a public Division II university in the Midwest United States in Participatory Action Research (PAR) to better understand the recruiting process during the pandemic and perceptions of coaches with insight from real-world experience living and working through the circumstance.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative PAR study was to explore collegiate coaches' perspectives on student-athlete recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is critical because it is likely that recruitment efforts in the face of disruptions will continue to exist as challenges for athletic coaches and departments. In addition, first-hand knowledge of how people cope with the changes offers new directions that may not be part of the existing literature.

Review of Literature

Student-Athlete Decision-Making Process

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the student-athlete college choice decision-making process was thoroughly researched. The factors in choosing an institution included the opportunity to play, head coach, athletic facilities, degree programs, academic support services, and social climate (Johnson, 2004). Additionally, the physical appearance of the campus, career opportunities beyond graduation, the academic reputation of the effective program, and meeting players on the team played an essential role in a student-athlete college choice (Swaim, 1983). Parents or legal guardians are primary influences for prospective NCAA student-athletes' thoughts, feelings, and opinions in the college-choice process (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). Among all school-choice factors considered for NCAA basketball recruits, the relationship with the head coach is considered the most influential (Barden et al., 2013).

Whether an individual is a full scholarship, partial scholarship, or non-scholarship student-athlete, a relationship with the head coach is a top factor in the decision to attend an institution (Johnson, 2004). However, this relationship-building was disrupted in the decision-making process due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The head coach-player relationship changed drastically in terms of communication, face-to-face interactions, and in-person

evaluations. Student-athletes were less equipped to make sound college-choice decisions with dramatic future implications due to the added uncertainty (Posteher, 2020). Recruits could not go on official and unofficial campus visits, meet players on the team, see facilities, and build trust in the person with coaches. Official visits and summer camps provide a realistic preview to weigh options and form expectations, resulting in a better opportunity for student-athletes to access fit (Posteher, 2020). Vital recruiting components such as socializing with the team are integral to determining fit (Posteher, 2020). Official visits allow recruits to spend time with team members and attain a different perspective on the student-athlete experience at a school, further enhancing a recruit's ability to make an informed decision on school choice (Posteher, 2020).

The pandemic also prevented exposure for recruits because coaches were not at summer events evaluating prospects. Additionally, recruits could not attend elite prospect camps on college campuses either, further complicating the recruiting process for players and coaches alike. On October 14, 2020, the NCAA announced that all student-athletes would be granted an initial year of eligibility (ESPN, 2020). The change further complicated the recruiting process for prospective student-athletes. Moving forward, the recruiting landscape in college athletics is evolving. Student-athletes and coaches' perceived role in the recruiting process needs a better understanding.

Challenges for Coaches in Recruitment Process

Social effectiveness is an extremely influential factor in student-athletes college choices (Magnusen et al., 2014). Recruiters in college sports must successfully identify, organize and prioritize influence strategies for different recruiting scenarios (Magnusen et al., 2014). College coaches of all sports cited many challenges recruiting during the pandemic. Two significant concerns were the inability to host recruits on campus tours or visit recruits at home (Lawson, 2020). NCAA Division I Basketball coach Staley, D. of the University of South Carolina, also cited coaches overall prefer face-to-face interactions with recruits (Blinder, 2021). Both opportunities were prohibited during the NCAA "dead period" when in-person recruiting contact was shut down. Campus visits turned into virtual Zoom visits. Stanford men's soccer coach Gunn, J. acknowledged, "we're desperate to be meeting face-to-face" (Blinder, 2021, p 32). Video observations of highlight films, online streaming services, YouTube links, and other sources were necessary for coaches to evaluate recruits. However, many coaches did not prefer watching films versus evaluating players in person (Blinder, 2021). "Seeing-is-believing" means that in-person activities are significant in the recruiting process (Harris, 2020). Former college basketball coach Biancardi, P. justified the importance of in-person evaluations, citing, "You can watch all the films you want. There are certain things you can't detect on film that you see watching a game live" (Collings, 2020, para. 34).

Theoretical Framework

Organizational Learning (OL) theory offers a framework developing new insights and informing practices. The theory focuses explicitly on the development of new knowledge which is optimal for the consideration and response to the rapid change resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, the OL theory seeks to make sense of interactions between people to create organic solutions to common problems (Dixon, 2017).

Further, the selection of OL theory to inform this study represents the acknowledgement of learning as a beneficial response to change. The field of athletic coaching like other industries felt the impact of disruption that ultimately meant the end of entire seasons of competition and the loss of opportunities. The OL theory pairs with the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology to seek understanding with a process improvement mindset.

Methodology

The qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach was a feasible option to capture coaches' perceptions of recruitment during the pandemic. This method opens insight on coaching perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic that may have been difficult to ascertain using other approaches. The PAR approach basically: Participation (life in society), Action (experience), and Research (knowledge creation) provides a simple acronym for the implementation of investigation in a real-world and constantly changing world (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019).

Participants and Setting

The researcher chose two head coaches and two associate head coaches at one Midwest NCAA Division II institution to participate using purposeful sampling, allowing the researcher to solicit individuals with the requisite experience. For this study, the researcher aimed to gain multiple perspectives from coaches on the impact of the student-athlete recruiting process during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Sport	Ethnicity	Gender
Participant #1 "Jack"	Basketball	Caucasian	Male
Participant #2 "Sam"	Basketball	Caucasian	Male
Participant #3 "Tyler"	Basketball	Caucasian	Male
Participant #4 "Maria"	Basketball	Caucasian	Female

Lawson et al. present five priorities in PAR that undergird the design, implementation, and evaluation of such inquiry. These include the following: opportunity for local stakeholders to participate in the exploration of problems around them, the process occurs in a practical form (plan, do, study, and act), new knowledge emerges through the process, work becomes relevant to practice and policy, and renewal of focus on local evidence that informs decisions for more relevant research that is practical.

Ethics and Confidentiality

Pseudonyms were assigned for confidentiality and to protect participants' identity. Next, the data collection process involves consent from participants and acknowledgments of rights to drop out of the study at any time without any repercussions. Finally, the data must have protection which was possible in this study utilizing a password-protected file on the computer (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Research Questions

Three research questions guide this qualitative study and include:

- RQ 1: What recruitment strategies did coaches use in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ 2: What challenges did student-athletes face in the recruiting process during the pandemic?
- RQ 3: What challenges did coaches face in the recruiting process during the pandemic?

Results and Discussion

The findings from this study reveal that face-to-face interactions are critical in the recruitment process of student-athletes. This includes player evaluations for coaches and campus visits for recruits. Overall, relationship building components between student-athletes and coaches in the recruiting process were extremely limited during the pandemic. Three emerging themes developed from the analysis of transcripts presented below include (1) online prospective athlete evaluation creates challenges, (2) inability to engage in person hinders interactions and communication, and (3) roster management and development inconsistent with disruption.

Theme 1: Traditional Recruiting Replaced with Technology-enabled Recruiting

The first theme “traditional recruiting replaced with technology-enabled recruiting” speaks to the information provided by various interviews in discussion of the challenges and subsequent changes resulting from COVID-19. Traditionally, athletic coaches scout prospective athletes and

evaluate readiness for competition at the collegiate level. All four participants cited the transition from evaluating recruits at in-person event to watching games online resulting in difficulty assessing players. Specifically, Sam explained, “Our evaluations had to be done via online livestream, which was very challenging because there are many important aspects of the recruiting process that can be picked up when you watch someone play in person and we were not able to do this during the most serious part of the pandemic.” Tyler agreed with the difficulty in evaluating recruits adding, “The film was very subpar, so it was extremely difficult to get a great assessment on their skill set, attitude, competitiveness, and passion to play.” Maria said, “Watching the film online was incredibly difficult to be confident we were getting a good assessment of a player and the person we were recruiting.”

This study suggests that college coaches rely on the in-person player evaluation process as a primary tool for identifying potential athletes. The respondents indicate that an adequate evaluation process using technology needs to be established. Theme 1 sets the stage for responding to COVID-19 disruption of collegiate athletics with technology-enabled solutions.

Theme 2: Inability to Engage in Person Hinders Interactions and Communication

All participants spoke about the inability to host recruits on campus and build relationships with face-to-face interactions. Namely, Jack suggested that “not being able to host normal visits. Just very limited face to face interactions” while explaining the fallout from the pandemic disruption. In addition to watching student-athletes perform as part of the evaluation process, coaches also meet with family members and that was also taken off the table due to social-distancing. Sam explains that “We couldn’t meet recruits and parents in person to engage and begin a more personal relationship. We couldn’t use our current players to meet with recruits and their families to sell the program and university.” Both Participants 3 and 4 also made supporting statements that validate theme 2.

From the study, it appears coaches prefer in-person interactions with prospective student-athletes. This study proposes that college coaches rely on the recruitment process as a primary tool introducing recruits to the university, academic programs, and athletic prowess. Establishing a personal level of connection is important for coaches to build rapport with players and sell the opportunities available within the program and school. Moving forward, coaching staffs need to develop other methods for recruits to see campus and build relationships when in-person recruiting is on pause.

Theme 3: Roster Management and Player Development Inconsistent with Disruption

Among the challenges prospective student-athletes face throughout the pandemic, limited numbers of scholarships presented less opportunity for recruits to play at the college level. Three coaches noted this lack of opportunity due to eligibility and transfer rules changing. Jack articulated, “I think the biggest challenge for student-athletes is that there were less opportunities

available for them because of everyone getting their extra year of eligibility back. Combine that with the timing of the transfer rule where guys don't have to sit out on a first-time transfer and there were just far less opportunities available." Likewise, Maria voiced, "I feel like their list of options was lower than it normally would have been because it was much more difficult for coaches to add new recruits to their list that they didn't already know about by watching games online." Tyler confirmed these recruiting complications expressing, "The class of '22 is really dealing with recruiting challenges due to the NCAA granting all current student-athletes an extra season of eligibility. This has caused many colleges to have limited, or no, scholarship dollars available for this graduating HS class."

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult situation for college coaches and prospective student-athletes alike. The pandemic affected the recruiting process in a myriad of ways, especially hindering vital in-person contacts between coaches and recruits. The perspectives of college basketball coaches during the COVID-19 pandemic offer important insight about the most important aspects of the recruiting process that must be considered to develop future contingency plans if in-person recruiting is again shut down.

Conclusion and Findings

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the need for change in the player recruitment, evaluation, and development process. Importantly, the pandemic disruption shows the need for athletic coaches to be flexible (learning) and adaptable (open to change) in the face of uncertainty. Dixon (2017) affirms the benefit of Organizational Learning theory as a blueprint for learning and change. Sustaining the most optimal communication and connection benefits from creative and proactive approaches to the process. The data, literature, and theory that are the basis for this study help with the following findings.

1. Athletic Coaches Must Adopt Agile Approaches to Recruitment
2. Recruiting Practices May Benefit from Use of Technology (social media)
3. Eligibility Changes Must Be Part of Succession Planning

Recommendations

College basketball staffs' recruiting efforts may benefit from the implementation of hosting head coach meet and greets for initial contacts with recruits via Zoom. Zoom is a useful tool to engage personally without having to meet in person and provides a better first impression than a phone call. The literature shows a relationship with the head coach is a top factor for recruits, so coaches must make an effort to build meaningful relationships with prospective athletes.

The emergence of technology in the recruitment process has changed the landscape of recruitment practices. Using OL Theory as a basis for improved recruiting practices, small college basketball staffs may benefit from seeking assistance from undergraduate students in communications, marketing and design departments. Utilizing the knowledge base these students have can lead to improved social media graphics, video production and overall communication strategies and outreach with recruits. College basketball coaches should utilize students with greater expertise in social media brand building and add them to the team as student managers or director of social media positions.

New eligibility rules allow for college players to transfer without missing a season of play. Moving forward, it is necessary for coaches to continually evaluate current college players in addition to the recruitment of high school players. Additional efforts to determine potential “fits” throughout the season will give coaches a foundational contact list of recruits. When a player on the list enters the transfer portal, coaches then get a head start building a relationship with a player. The importance of a relationship is supported by research, and the first coach to form a relationship with a recruit may be a vital decision-making factor in the recruitment process for a prospective athlete.

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