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## Determining High School Athletes' Awareness of the College Athletics Recruitment Process: A Systematic Review

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# **Determining High School Athletes' Awareness of the College Athletics Recruitment**

## **Process: A Systematic Review**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in

*Health Sciences and Kinesiology.*

By

*A. Elease Ryals*

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Christina Gipson and Dr. Jody Langdon*

### ABSTRACT

The collegiate athletic recruitment process is the pathway for some student-athletes to continue to play sports in college. The purpose of the recruitment process to play college athletics is to establish academic success and create connections with the recruiting coaches and staff. A major benefit that college athletics can provide is scholarships to student-athletes so that they can continue their education. The purpose of this study was to conduct a systematic review of current literature to connect studies of the collegiate athletic recruiting process. In this study, a systematic review was conducted using academic research centered on high school athletes and their knowledge of the recruiting process. The study was conducted using an integrative approach to systematic review to determine what is currently known about the recruitment process among high school athletes. The data collection process is ongoing and will be completed in March of 2023.

Keywords: NCAA, recruiting process, high school athletes, student-athletes, knowledge

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## Introduction

Continuing to play sports collegiately, and possibly professionally, is a dream of many student-athletes in the United States. For many sports, the path to these dreams starts with an athlete being recruited and starting their transition to play sports on a college campus. Athletes that possess talent in a sport have a better chance of participating in collegiate sports. The largest organization in the United States that supports college athletics is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The NCAA has three divisions that each member school is categorized into: Division I, II, and III (*Recruiting - Eligibility Center*, 2014). In order for a student-athlete to participate in an NCAA member school in any division, there are requirements that must be met for eligibility. Requirements for eligibility include grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, and core class credits (*Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete*, 2021). Many of these are minimum requirements and are similar to requirements to be accepted into some universities. For example, at Division I institutions, a student-athlete must earn a minimum of a 2.3 average on a 4-point scale in their core classes, in addition to having a GPA high enough to get accepted into the university (*Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete*, 2021).

Outside of talent in the sport, NCAA academic eligibility is one of the components of the recruiting process for student-athletes (*NCAA Academic Requirements*, 2020). The NCAA has core classes that are required for the student-athletes to take while in high school, categorized by subject. Most of these classes are very similar to graduation requirements, but it is still important for the student-athlete to pass them to remain eligible with the NCAA. To submit their information to the NCAA,

the student-athlete has to create a profile with the NCAA (*NCAA Eligibility Center*, 2022). Through this profile, the athlete can upload their academic and athletic history.

Outside of academics, the NCAA has created a recruiting process that has components that will lead prospective student-athletes to choose which institution they would like to play. During the recruiting process, the student-athletes are evaluated by coaches, which is when a college coach observes a student-athlete competing or practicing (*Recruiting - Eligibility Center*, 2014). After evaluations, a coach has times when they can make contact with a student-athlete, which is face-to-face contact and interaction between a coach and a student-athlete (*Recruiting - Eligibility Center*, 2014).

The prospective student-athlete can take campus visits to help with the recruitment process. Visits allow for contact with coaches and for the athlete to get a feel of the program to help them to make their college decision. There are two types of visits defined by the NCAA: official visits and unofficial visits. Visits paid for by student-athletes and their families are considered unofficial visits and on an official visit, the college can pay for up to three meals per day, lodging, and travel for the student-athlete and their family (*Recruiting - Eligibility Center*, 2014). During both unofficial and official visits, the student-athlete can receive up to three tickets to a home sports event (*Recruiting - Eligibility Center*, 2014).

All of these elements discussed make up the recruitment process. This process includes all the communication between the student-athlete and the coaches, the academic requirements, preparing highlight reels, and visiting campus (*NCAA Eligibility Center*, 2022). In order to successfully move on to play at any level of NCAA institution, the high school athlete must be aware of what they need to do to be recognized and

recruited by these college coaches while in high school. The NCAA website gives information to athletes about eligibility requirements and rules for contacting and visiting campus, however, the athlete needs to know how to access this information and that it is available to them (*Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete*, 2021).

At the end of the recruiting process, a student-athlete can verbally commit to a college that they feel they would like to attend and play with. A verbal commitment is when a prospective student-athlete agrees to play a sport for a college before they sign a National Letter of Intent (*Recruiting - Eligibility Center*, 2014). The National Letter of Intent is the official document of the NCAA where the student-athlete agrees to play at a Division I or II school in exchange for the school agreeing to provide financial aid for one academic year. Signing this letter ends the recruiting process for that student-athlete.

With these aspects of the process being defined by the NCAA, there have been other components of the process that have helped athletes to become more discoverable by the college coaches and recruiters. Research has been conducted and found that there is a “hidden curriculum” behind the college recruitment process (Hextrum, 2018a). In this study, the researcher was interested if there were other elements of the recruitment process that might be not advertised to those that are preparing to make a college athletic decision themselves. The study found that there were 3 areas where the coaches recognized student-athletes that were prospects to be recruited. These areas included student-athletes that have socialization skills, skills desirable to be recruited, and that make calls to gain access (Hextrum, 2018a). In another study, the author found that in addition to the skills that gave an advantage to student-athletes, there were other elements of the process that helped the student-athlete get recruited. The research concluded that

the athletes that were recruited attended sports camps and/or had recruiting agents (Hextrum, 2018b). Another factor that has contributed to the recruiting process for student-athletes is their participation in club sports outside of varsity sports through their high school (McGovern, 2018). Participation in these club sports helps to keep the student-athlete active during off seasons and practice additional skills to enhance their talent. These additional components helped the student-athlete gain exposure to the college coaches. However, these components are not accessible to all athletes because of their cost (Hextrum, 2018b).

All the communication between the athletes and coaches, the rules that must be followed in order to be eligible with the NCAA, and the different steps that a high school athlete needs to know to combine to create what can be known as the recruitment process. This process was created for institutions to determine which athletes are best for their programs. After reviewing the recruiting process of NCAA athletics and what elements have been proven to contribute to helping student-athletes to be successful products of this process, there is a question of who is aware of this process. Many of the studies that have been conducted have researched current college athletes, who have successfully achieved access to play at the next level. When student-athletes are in high school, they are actively participating in the recruiting process and possibly missing elements that could be the reason that they are not continuing to play at the next level after high school.

Due to there being many different elements of the recruiting process, it is possible to find that most high school athletes are not aware of the steps toward continuing to play sports in college. From the literature, most studies have been interviews of current college athletes after they have been through the recruiting process and successfully



obtained a chance to play at the collegiate level, whether on scholarship or not. The purpose of this study is to find academic literature to gain an understanding of high school athletes' awareness and experiences of the recruitment process to play sports collegiately. A systematic review was conducted for this thesis to better understand high school student athletes' knowledge of the recruitment process.

## Methods

### Search Strategy

A search was conducted on SPORTDiscus (EBSCO) using the keywords “high school athletes” and “collegiate recruiting process”. The timeframe was 2000-2020. This time frame was included to produce relevant articles that happened before the COVID-19 pandemic. The rules of the recruitment process have changed since then (*NCAA Eligibility Center COVID-19 Response FAQ*, 2023). The initial search showed 607 articles. Of those articles, 111 were excluded because they did not reference the NCAA. Student-athletes interested in participating with NCAA member institutions are the only ones of interest in this study. 222 were then excluded because they mentioned “fandom or fan culture or fans”. These terms were deemed necessary to exclude because of common results that appeared that were not relevant to this study. All other articles were related to high school athletes and the recruitment process for NCAA divisions. That resulted in 274 articles being found from the final search. Searches were only conducted in English. Only original research was included in this study.

### Selection Criteria

Relevant research was selected based on the following criteria: (a) the study referenced high school athletes; (b) referenced the knowledge of the recruiting process; (c) referring to the NCAA; and (d) only referred to the items in the search criteria. The study selection process consisted of screening titles and abstracts identified during the search of the online database. Criteria for limiting the search were added to try to narrow the search to find results that addressed NCAA student-athletes and their coaches’ experiences within the recruitment process. The full texts of these articles were read in

greater detail and as a result, four studies were found to fit the criteria listed above and included in the systematic review. Two hundred and seventy journals were excluded because they were not relevant to help answer the research question. The remaining four were examined to focus on the methods and data and were determined as relevant research. A flow chart, shown in Figure 1, was created to illustrate the selection process during this study.

### **Data Extraction**

Data extraction was performed by one reviewer who read the four studies. The selected studies were analyzed for their connection to knowledge of the recruiting process amongst high school student-athletes. Content analysis of the articles was also performed. The articles were screened to find important phrases and topics. Some of these important topics include experiences of high school athletes' recruitment process, knowledge of the recruitment process, and practices of institutions during the process that high school athletes might not be aware of. These topics were deemed important because of their connection back to the research question. The articles were then analyzed by their participants, research questions, and results to determine if they were helpful to answer the research question.

## **Results**

After reviewing the studies that were selected for the systematic review, information about the recruitment process was gathered from current journals. The information was pulled from the studies and was compared to try to answer the research question of whether high school athletes are aware of the recruitment process. Table 1 was created to display an overview of the results from the four articles: authors, objectives, participants, connection to the research question, methodology, and results.

### **Participants Selected**

The articles pulled for this study researched different areas of participants. The participants from these studies included people of different genders, ages, sports, occupations, and ethnicities. Participants represented collegiate recruiting staff, current and former collegiate student-athletes, and high school head coaches. These participants all impact the recruiting process for the high school athlete in some form. With information from these participants, connections to the student athletes' knowledge of the process can be concluded.

### **Methodologies Used**

Two of the articles selected were conducted via quantitative studies and the others were conducted using qualitative data from interviews. One quantitative study used a Likert-like scale to establish how important the hidden curriculum strategies were to the different college programs. The other quantitative study used a questionnaire to test the knowledge of the coaches of the process. The two qualitative studies used the interviews to ask about experiences during the recruiting process of student athletes after their process was completed.

## Summary of the Results

The objectives of the selected articles represented different areas of the recruitment process. For this review, they were linked for their connection to the student athlete's potential knowledge of the process. The most common connection between the articles was that they addressed the hidden curriculum of the recruitment process. In the interviews, the athletes talked about their experiences during the recruiting process where they participated in camps, club sports, and other activities that helped them to be recruited but came at an additional cost to them and their families. Student-athletes that participated in these extracurriculars also belonged to middle and upper-middle-class families. Articles from this study also identified more areas that are important for a high school athlete to know that college recruiters are looking into, that are not included in the NCAA rules, and information presented about the process.

It was also concluded that the coaches that are mentoring these athletes are not aware of the recruiting process as well. The coaches acknowledged that they played a role in the recruiting process of their student-athletes. However, they were deemed not fully aware of the recruiting rules. From the questionnaire, on average, the coaches were only able to answer about half of the questions correctly. These questions asked about NCAA requirements at the Division I, II, and III levels as well as knowledge about the National Athletic Intercollegiate Association (NAIA). It was concluded that coaches knew more about the NCAA Division I requirements than the other divisions.

From these studies, it is evident that there is a gap in research about the knowledge of the recruitment process among high school athletes. The search that was conducted brought up results that were relevant to the research question but still were not

specific enough to answer the question fully. The studies found included relevant research to the recruiting process but failed to mention either the high school athlete or their knowledge of the process. The gaps in the results lead back to the question of whether high school athletes are aware of what goes on in the recruiting process. The research question only applies to a specific group of people and inquires about the knowledge of a specific subject. There is reason to believe that the research about this specific subject might not have been conducted yet. The sports industry is a fast-changing industry and the recruiting process has rules and regulations that change constantly. With these points in mind, there is room for research in the future about this specific sample and their knowledge of the process.

## Conclusion

The collegiate recruiting process has changed over time. The elements of the process include academic requirements, campus visits, and communications with coaches. There are some other elements of the process that help high school athletes to be recognized by college recruiters as well. With the new rules and regulations that have been adopted by the NCAA and with the change in the climate of collegiate sports, this process is ever-changing and can be hard to keep up with. It is reasonable to inquire if as high school athletes are preparing to be recruited by collegiate programs, they are aware of what is required to move into the next level of sports.

The purpose of this systematic review was to analyze studies that addressed the knowledge of the collegiate recruiting process among high school athletes. From the search, only four studies were found that referred to the recruiting process or the knowledge of high school athletes about this process. Most of the results from the search included studies that would fit into the following categories: criteria for choosing a college, the NCAA transfer portal, recruiting tactics, socioeconomic factors in the recruiting process, experiences as a student-athlete, recruiting practices of teams, athletic training, and gender roles in sports. While these categories might be important to know about for high school athletes entering the collegiate recruiting process, they do not refer to the specific group of interest and therefore did not fit the criteria to be included in this review.

The studies that were selected to be included in this review were selected because they fit into the following criteria: references the keywords used in the search, references high school athletes, and references knowledge of the recruiting process. These criteria

were very specific to find the results of a specific target sample. A study that would fit all three criteria would be considered helpful in answering the research question. The goal of the search was to find studies about high school athletes' knowledge of the recruiting process and there were only a few studies that were found that fit these criteria. However, each result that was found did not fit all the criteria, rather just one.

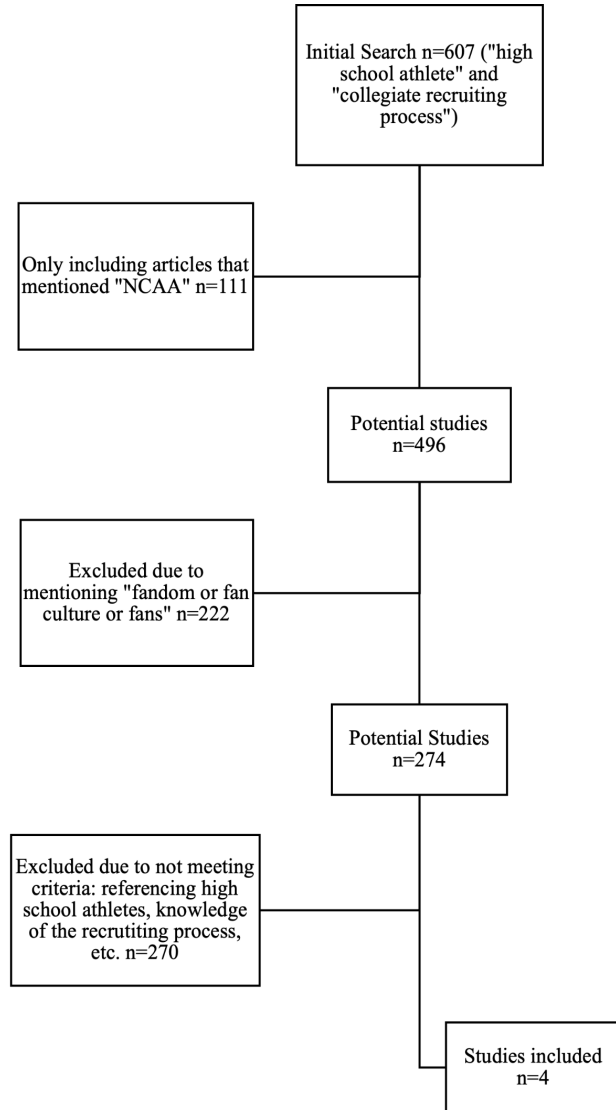
From these results, it is reasonable to believe that there is a gap in the research about high school athletes and their knowledge of the recruiting process. From research for this study, studies have been found about the current collegiate athletes about their previous experiences in the recruiting process. Other studies asked about the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of the recruiting process from other people involved. Those studies were helpful in learning what recruiting staff members are looking for and how current high school coaches help in the recruitment process of their student-athletes. None of these studies asked high school athletes about how aware they are of the information that NCAA requires to be recruited and other elements that will give them an advantage to be recruited.

This gap in research creates a way for future research about this specific sample in question. Future research can be conducted by asking high school athletes about their current experiences preparing for being recruited to play sports in college. In this future study, the high school athletes could be quizzed on how well they know the information that the NCAA requires to successfully continue playing sports at one of their institutions. This study could help to get a better understanding of how many high school athletes are aware of the recruiting process. If it is concluded that high school athletes are not aware of this process, then the NCAA could use the results from future studies to



provide more correct information to high school athletes. This could help to potentially increase the likelihood of a high school athlete moving on to play sports in college.

This review sought to analyze current literature regarding the collegiate athletic recruiting process and high school athletes. It is safe to say that current literature is not able to adequately answer the question of whether high school athletes are aware of what is needed to transition into playing collegiate sports. This review produces answers that can be used in the high school and collegiate sport realms. Both realms can use the information provided in this review to encourage athletes to educate themselves on the recruitment process. Researchers can also learn from this systematic review to find areas to conduct further research.



**Figure 1**

*Flow Chart of the Sampling Process*

**Table 1***Results From the Systematic Review*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Participants questioned</b>	<b>Connection to research question</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Results that help answer research question</b>
Castle, Ammon, & Barnes (2015)	To determine how the APR rating has impacted NCAA DI programs recruiting and retention strategies	111 Directors of Football Operations in Division I programs	The APR is an academic scale that rates college athletic teams based on academic progress. As the APR becomes more relevant, recruiters are looking for prospective student athletes that will help them to have higher ratings. High school athletes need to be aware of the importance of their grades in the mind of the recruiters, not just on the field ability.	Quantitative: Likert scale survey	The APR rating affected the recruiting strategies of these DI programs. Programs were less likely to recruit players with lower APR ratings in academics and discipline problems. This strategy is now a part of this process that high school athletes might not be aware of.
Hextrum (2018)	To explore how US collegiate athletic recruitment favors middle-class athletes	47 College athletes from a NCAA Division I institution. These athletes participated in rowing and track and field.	The study researches the impact that the economic status of the athlete has on the success of their recruiting process.	Qualitative: life-history interviews	The elements of the process that helped the athletes the most were ones that come at cost to the household. Successfully moving on to play collegiate athletics has been connected to the economic status of the student athlete. The middle and upper classes had the advantage during their recruiting process because of access to these items. These households

Authors	Objectives	Participants questioned	Connection to research question	Methodology	Results that help answer research question
					had the resources to have access and knowledge of the hidden curriculum of the recruiting process.
McGovern (2018)	To explain the small percentage of Latinas competing in collegiate sport	31 Latina current and former collegiate student athletes that also participated in high school sports in the United States	Participants were asked about their experience during the recruiting process	Qualitative: interviews	Majority of Latina collegiate athletes participated in club sports as a youth and come from middle and upper middle class families. Club sports have been shown to be beneficial in aid to high school athletes getting recruited. These youth and club sport extracurriculars come at the expense of the family and are a part of the hidden curriculum of the recruiting process that many athletes are not aware of.
Owen & Kotrlik (2012)	To determine the perceptions of high school girls' basketball coaches on their role in their athletes' transition to play at the next level	128 Louisiana high school girls' basketball coaches, Majority were white males with an average of	One of the areas where the coaches were questioned was about their knowledge of what the athletes need to do to be recruited to play in college	Quantitative	The coaches believe that they do play a role in their athletes' recruiting process. Coaches were asked to correctly answer questions about the recruiting process to prove their knowledge. The coaches in the study were only able to answer about 50 percent of the questions

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Participants questioned</b>	<b>Connection to research question</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Results that help answer research question</b>
		eight years of head coaching experience			about the recruiting rules and process correctly. If the coaches are the mentors of the student athletes, their lack of knowledge of this process could affect the student athletes' knowledge of the process.

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