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St. John Fisher College

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What Influences Student Athletes to Choose Division III Schools?

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SPST 495 – Senior Seminar

St. John Fisher College – Sports Studies Department
Abstract

Student-Athletes today are faced with many difficult decisions in their young lives, one of them being what college they want to attend. Those student athletes that don’t have the luxury of being recruited to Division I or II schools must decide what they value most in a school and how the school they choose will impact their future. The student athletes at St. John Fisher College are no exception. Student-athletes at St. John Fisher will be to complete a survey looking at the factors and influences that lead them to their decision.
What Influences Student Athletes to Choose Division III Schools?

There are over 430,000 Division III student athletes that are enrolled in over 400 member schools. (NCAA, 2012) None of these student athletes receive any kind of athletic scholarships or any aid from the school to participate in athletics, even with this fact Division III is the largest division in all of the NCAA. (NCAA, 2012) The athletes that participate in Division III Athletics are not considered the same caliber of athlete as Division I athletes are, and the majority of them will not be going on to play professionally but they are recruited and they do have choices when it comes to schools to go to. There must be a drawing point a drawing point for those student athletes that are not considered “the best of the best”, and the reason must be good enough to pay their own way through school while also balancing a sport, job, and education.

Every student athlete has taken their own road to the point where they are being recruited by various colleges and universities. The road they take makes it so that they are each looking at a different set of factors that would lead to their choice. Some factors that may influence their decision could be their relationship with the head coach, the campus community, others that is already on the team, and the proximity of the school to their home (Kankey, 2007). Coaches must notice that each athlete is different and that they must recruit each athlete differently if they wish for the recruits to play for them over the next four years of their lives.

It is a challenge for the coaches at the Division III levels because they experience a whole different set of challenges then does those at the Division I and II level (Aurand, 2007). Division III coaches cannot offer scholarships, they cannot offer national exposure on ESPN or Fox, and they cannot offer them the chance to get to the professional level as the majority of division III athletes do not play a sport as a career. These factors make it so that coaches and schools have to offer other opportunities that they can only offer such as being close to home, a strong relationship with the coaching staff, less
pressure compared the higher divisions, and the ability to continue their athletic career where they would otherwise not have the chance to.

**Literature Review**

Previous research has explored how students and student athletes select their colleges, as specific nuances are relevant to the student – athlete population; more detailed research has explored this unique group. There has been a lot of research that was done about Division I and II athletes but there was not a lot of research done about Division III athletes. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, there are more Division III Universities then there is Division I or II Universities but there is not a lot of research done about this large group of student athletes. This group needs to be explored further because of variety of different athletes and Universities across the country that have different athletic regulations that Division I and II institutions do not face.

**Factors Influencing College Choice**

Division I athletics is an entirely different animal than anything else in sports and each sport has their own specifics on how they operate as far as recruiting student athletes. Athletes, no matter what sport they play, are all looking for a place that they will feel comfortable and a place that can jump start them to their professional career, no matter the level they are play at (Kankey, 2007). Many studies have been taken on what influences Division I student athletes to choose a school. Specifically, Kankey (2007), Pauline (2010), and Klenosky (2001) look at what influenced those athletes in those sports to choose the schools they did. In Kankey’s study, it was found that the most influential factors for Division I softball players were the availability of a major, future career opportunities, and the relationship with the head coach (2007). Pauline on the other hand looked at division I, II, and III lacrosse players and what influenced their school of choice (2010). Pauline’s research found that lacrosse players looked at their connection with the head coach, academic tradition, and social environment were the most influential factors for them choosing a school (Pauline, 2010). Klenosky did a study with a smaller sample
size of twenty-seven student athletes who varied in race, age, and gender who also participated in a variety of sports (2001). The results showed that within the twenty-seven participants the highest rated factors were the relationship with the head coach, the social atmosphere of the campus, and the opportunity for a professional athletic career (Klenosky, 2001). Between each sport there is a lot of overlapping factors that lead to an athlete’s college selection such as the relationship with the head coach, campus community, and academic tradition. However there are also some sports that have other factors that some do not, such as professional career opportunities and the amount of scholarship that is given.

Every student is motivated by different factors when they look at a school (Goss, 2006); looked at what institutional factors are involved in how coaches and school look to recruit future students to their school. Some student athletes like to be in small communities that resemble their homes or just like the closeness of being at a tight-knit place (Goss, 2006). Using a pool of 229 freshman student athletes, from six different institutions across the country, Goss looked at what motivates student athletes to attend small colleges or universities (Goss, 2006). Based on the interviews conducted, the results showed that the majority of the factors that drove the student athletes to small schools were not sport related; overall only 4 of the top ten were related to sport factors. The majority of the factors came from the academic side of the institution and the closeness of the campus community (Goss, 2006). The factor of want a tight knit campus community can be tied to the factor of the teammates they will have and their relationship with their head coach. If a student athlete were to have a strong relationship with their team and coaches they will feel more at home while on campus.

Besides coaches trying to sell their school to potential student-athlete recruits, the school tries to market themselves to the type of students that they would like to have at their school. Both Aurand (2004) and Robinson (2010) looked into how the marketing strategies of the school can make an impact on how a potential recruit sees the school and how they see the school as a whole. Aurand looked into
what are today’s student athlete’s priorities when choosing a school to attend (2004). The study represented twenty different sports and a variety of different races and both male and females. Aurand found that the most significant factors in their selection decision are the level of athletic competition, academic reputation of the school, and availability of the major (2004). Robinson then looks at how NCAA division III schools try to market their schools and their athletic programs. Division III schools face the difficulty that the media is already flooded with division I athletic events and the money is not always there to market an athletic program (Robinson, 2010). Most division III schools rely on football to drive their marketing efforts and try to also rely on the school’s academic standing to attract student athletes (Robinson, 2010).

When it comes to recruiting high school student athletes, it is hard to meet all of their needs and meet all of their expectations. Then there are times that students just decide that the school they choose is not the school for them. Clark (2009) performed a study to determine if the athlete retention is the same between athletes on scholarship and those that are not. Clark took into account if the athlete was on scholarship, the amount of the scholarship, and if they stay playing the sport all four years or don’t play and stay at the school as the variables (2009). The results the study showed that there was a higher retention rate in individual sport athletes then those in team sports (2009). Athlete retention could also be influenced by schools falsely advertising their school, whether it be the coach or the school itself and that could influence the decision of the high school athlete when they make their initial choice as evidence by the studies done by Pauline and Kankey.

Just as there are factors that influence Division I a student athletes and the way that marketing influences all student athletes to certain schools, the identity and personality also plays a role in what school a student athlete chooses. In studies done by Gilson (2007), Groves (2007), Burnett (2010), and Letawsky (2003) all looked into the athlete’s personalities and their identities that they have and how it influenced their college choice. Gilson looked to see what athletes identity was for athletes at the
Division I level, “it is known that Division I and Division III colleges and universities function differently with respect to expectations of athletes for athletic performance and the focus required on education (Gilson, 2007, pg.297). “ What this means is that student athletes at each division function differently and have different goals when it comes to their focus on athletics and education. Gilson found, “although many came to college (as freshman) with optimistic views about academics, after about the first year, they began to sense the lack of importance placed on academics. (Gilson, 2007 p.298).” This part of his study was on his finding on Division I athletes and found it to be drastically different than that of Division III athletes. Athletes usually have different sets of factors, either academic or athletic factors. “The dominant elements among the themes are the future, relationships, and productivity; this indicates the importance of success in decisions that influence which college to attend (Groves, 2007).” There are also the social factors that are involved with student athletes choosing the schools that they do. A lot of people are involved with the success of student athlete, whether it be parents, teachers, coaches etc (Burnett, 2010). However, when it comes down to making a college choice for an eighteen year old student athlete, people need to recognize what the student athlete wants and supporting them in making the best decision for them, “at the same time essential support needs to be provided to the student athlete in order for him or her to succeed in a role other than that of an active competitor.”(Burnett, 2010) Overall, there are set of main factors that Division I student athletes look at “Overall the factors that stand out within the decision paths are parents, quality of life after graduation and future dollar considerations.” (Groves, 2007)

In reference to previous research, there is very minimal research done about college selection process of Division III student athletes and Division III athletes in general. This study will attempt to analyze the student athlete’s population at St. John Fisher College. This study will look in-depth at what influenced student athletes to choose the Division III school they ended up at, what factors lead to that decision, what other schools did they look at when they choose St. John Fisher.
Method

Research Tradition

The research tradition that this project will use will be post positivism. The reason that this project uses the post positivist approach is because I am trying to determine why student athletes choose Division III schools to continue their athletic career. That data that is collected in this research will be both qualitative and quantitative through email surveys with St. John Fisher College student athletes (Henderson, 2011). Even after the data is collected and a conclusion is settled on, the knowledge that is gained is not absolute because of the small sample size of just student athletes from St. John Fisher College (Henderson, 2011). However, the data that is collected can give a glimpse of what the majority reason for choosing Division III institutions. Lastly, what makes this research part of the post-positivism tradition is that there is room for interpretation through the data that is collected and allows for the drawing of conclusions on the sample size (Henderson, 2011).

Participant Selection

The participant for the study of why student athletes choose Division III schools will be student athletes at St. John Fisher College. The participants will be athletes that are both in season and out of season and are currently enrolled at St. John Fisher College as a student. The reason that this population was selected is because of the easy accessibility to the population through the St. John Fisher email system and my daily interaction with student athletes being a coach for the women’s basketball team. All student athletes at the college will be surveyed for a couple of reasons, first that the more surveys that are sent out the better chance of receiving a large number of responses. Second, using the entire population of St. John Fisher student athletes allows for me to sort the data in different ways such as by sport, season length, gender, etc.

Conceptual Framework
The conceptual frame work for my thesis assignment involves trying to find out why student athletes choose to attend Division III schools. This will be accomplished by conducting surveys and interviews with current St. John Fisher College student athletes through the means of email and face to face interviews. To properly access this issue and draw a conclusion I will look at such variables as what sport they participate in, how long they have participated in their sport, athletics vs. academics, and what other schools were considered while choosing a school.

- **Sport of Participation:** This variable will be defined at what sport they came to college to play. The reason that this is an important variable to collect and look at is because the opinions of those that participate in revenue sports and non revenue sports may be different and that information should be recorded and accounted for when making conclusions at the end of the research (Groves, Schneider, & Ryan, 2007). There is however cases of student athletes participating in more than one sport, the results that come from those athletes will be calculated in a separate category because they cannot be counted as a revenue or non revenue athlete if they are in both kinds of sports.

- **How Long they have participated in their sport:** The length of time the participant has participated in the current sport they are playing in will bring reason to their answers to the other survey questions and also bring reason to why they did or didn’t consider a higher division school such as Division I and II, and insight into what kind of athlete Division III schools attract.

- **Academics vs. Athletics:** This variable will be defined as if the student athlete values academics more in a school or if they value athletics. This variable will bring another element to the overall answer to the research question and make it known to Division II schools if the students that are attending and selecting their school look more into athletics and academics (Groves, Schneider, & Ryan, 2007). This variable will allow for school administrators and coaches to narrow their focus when they try to attract student athletes to their team/school.
- **Other schools that were considered**: This variable is defined as the other schools that the participant considered before choosing St. John Fisher College. This is an important variable because it is mostly likely that when considering schools that the final choices were all alike in some way. This will allow schools to see who they are competing against when it comes to attracting student athletes and what the deciding factors were (Goss, Jubenville, & Orejan, 2006). The information that is received from this category will allow for what level of university St. John Fisher is being compared to and what other colleges they are at par with. This information will not only allow coaches to know who they are recruiting against but also although the school itself to what students they are attracted and how they can better market themselves compared to their rivals.

**Theoretical Framework:**

There are a lot of theories of why people make the decision they make but the bottom line is people make their decision based on what they feel they need and what is most important to them (Marsh, 1978). When a student athlete comes down to making a decision on what college they want to attend and where they would like to play, the process they go through greatly resembles Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Marsh, 1978). Student athletes will base their decision on where they feel the most respect, feel the most at home, and where they can be themselves. There is also the choice of if athletic success is more important or academic presage. This falls into Maslow’s theory in the esteem and psychological sections of Maslow’s pyramid. Overall, every year student athletes have to choose where they want to go to school after high school but the qualities in the school that they are looking at are the same even though each school is different.

**Data Collection Instrument**
The way that the data for this project will be collect is through a campus wide email survey to all current St. John Fisher athletes (Appendix 2). A survey is the best choice of data collection for this type of study because it allows for a mass amount of data to be collected and it also allows the participants to answer the survey at their leisure during the time frame that the survey will be active. The survey also makes it possible to receive first hand data of what influences student athletes to choose a Division III school.

The survey will be approximately ten to fifteen questions in length. The length of the survey was chosen because it was determined that ten to fifteen was the appropriate length for this survey. It is the appropriate length because it is not too overbearing that students will not want to complete the survey while also having it be long enough so that useful and substantial data can be obtained.

The beginning questions of the survey will be mainly demographic questions such as the age group they are in, sport they participate in, and what year at Fisher they are in. These questions allow for the data to be categorized and make the remaining questions answers to just be allotted in those categories. These questions are also important because it allows for the participant of the study to be profiled.

The rest of the survey will focus on questions that help answer the main research question. These questions will be questions like what convinced you that Fisher was the right school for you, what is most important to you when looking at a school, who had the biggest influence in your college decision, and who else recruited you. These questions will give information into the influences they had when choosing Fisher, whether it was the coach, parents, or the school in general.

The collection of the demographic questions and the specific study questions will give us the information necessary to complete the research and answer the main research question. If there are not enough surveys completed at the end of the active period, a second round of surveys will be sent out to St. John Fisher College student athletes in hopes to receive more responses.
Data Collection and Analysis Plan

This survey will be sent electronically through the school email and will be about ten to fifteen questions in length (Appendix Two). The surveys will be sent out two weeks after students return from spring break at St. John Fisher College. After the surveys are sent out, the student athletes will have 2 weeks to complete the survey. This time frame allows time for the data to be sorted and evaluated. It is projected to take one week for all the data to be collected and evaluated in graph and chart form. During the following week, the data will be put into the research paper and prepared for presentation.

Once the data is collected, then the data will be sorted by how many of each answer was chosen and then that data will be put into a table and put into percentages based on the number of participants that chose the given answer compared to the total amount of participants. The percentages will be the number that is put into the tables.

Results

Following a month long study into why student athletes at St. John Fisher College choose to attend and compete at a Division III school, there seemed to be a majority as to why they thought Fisher was the school for them. The survey resulted in over seventy complete surveys from over two hundred student athletes that were asked to participate. Each student athlete completed a survey that had nine complete answers that lead to not many questions to why St. John Fisher College student athletes choose the college they did. Within the student athletes that participated in the survey over sixty percent of them were female, thirty percent of the participants were from the junior class, and thirty four percent of the athletes were from the male and female soccer teams. However, each sport and each academic class were well represented in this survey as each sport and class had at least ten responses.
Student athletes at St. John Fisher College had an overwhelming response when it came to saying who was the biggest influence in them making their final college choice. Forty Four percent of the respondents said that their parents had the biggest influence on their college decision. This is a very typical answer when compared to previous research; the parents are in most cases the people that help pay for college and are also the ones that have the biggest influence on the children decisions anyways (Pauline, 2010). The only other influence that generated any significance results was the influence of the college coach. Twenty – Eight percent of the respondents selected their college coach as the biggest influence. This is also a typical result because in collegiate athletics, it is the coaches that are the ones trying to get the athletes to their school and play for them, and during the recruiting process it is the coach that they have the best relationship is the coach they most likely choose to commit too.

Another overwhelming result that came from the survey was that seventy-eight percent of those who completed the survey said that the academic tradition of the school was more important to them then the athletic prestige of the school. According to Gilson, Division III athletes seem to be more focused on their academics and what they are going to do after college then their Division I and II counterparts (Gilson, Feltz, & Sturm, 2007). The typical student that goes to a college like St. John Fisher, is not a student that is looking to make a career out of their sport and as evidence from the survey, they are more school oriented and see their sport as something extra rather than valuing their sport ahead of their academics.

One other result that had had a majority response was the question of what other schools the student athletes considered other than St. John Fisher. The most popular responses were SUNY Brockport, Ithaca College, and SUNY Cortland. This result is interesting in the fact that only Ithaca is a school that Fisher competes with in their athletic conference and that they seem to be competing for students athletes with mainly SUNY schools when it came down to St. John Fisher student athletes top
three choices. Another interesting twist to this result is that the majority of the schools that Fisher is competing against are public schools. This is important because as a Division III coach if you know that the athletes your are recruiting are looking at mainly public school then you must try to create an angle of why the student should pay more to come to your school or if it’s a coach at a public school trying to drive home the fact of how much more expensive it is to attend a private institution

Lastly, the one result that sticks out the most through all the research was that the most common athletic or academic factor that made the student athletes chooses Fisher was that they offered certain degree programs that allowed them to get the education they wanted out of the school they were going to choose. Over eighty percent of the athletes that were survey had the degree offerings as their first or second factor of why they choose St. John Fisher College. They choose this over relationship with their coaches, facilities, and opportunity to play. This falls in line with research that was done by Gilson in 2007 with his research on comparing Division I and III athletes.

Discussion

Overall, these studies at the very least backs up what previous studies have claimed about Division III student athletes. The results that were revealed about what where the student athletes determining factors and influences about their college choice match those of the studies that were done from Pauline and Aurand. The results of this study also show that the student athletes at St. John Fisher College have the same intentions and same interests as those of other Division III athletes across the country and further validate the research of this study and that from previous studies.

However the results of this study are not absolute and cannot be seen as complete fact because of the small sample of only seventy two student athletes from only one Division III college. More questions need to be answered before schools and coaches can really have a general idea of why student athletes choose to attend Division III schools. Some of the questions that still remain after this
study are students that choose Division III schools selecting those schools because of the academic tradition or because the school was marketed on the basis of academics, how big of a factor is the schools proximity to home, and who has a bigger influence on a student athletes selection the coaches or their future teammates, etc. The college selection process is a very fluid one and it changes from athlete to athlete depending on their own circumstance and what they value.

This study did bring however results with a clear cut majority when it comes to valuing academics or athletes, the college choice influences, and other schools St. John Fisher is competing with for student athletes. The information that this survey produced can be very helpful for not only coaches and the athletic department but also the college because they can know what areas to focus their marketing campaigns on and know who to look at when they want to compare themselves against other Universities.

In conclusion, although this study resulted in some very interesting statistics, the results are still inconclusive. The reason they are inconclusive is because of the small sample size and the fact that athletes at only one school were surveyed. If I were to do this study over or continue with this study I would make some changes to this study to make it better. The changes I would make would be to survey some more Division III schools and try to get a larger sample size. I would also try to reach out to the authors of previous studies to see if I could use some of their research or reach out to their connections that they used for their study. Overall, this study does paint a picture of who a St. John Fisher College student athlete is and what drew them to St. John Fisher rather than a rival school.
References


Dear St. John Fisher College Student Athletes,

My name is Patrick Stellman and I am a senior in the Sport Management program. I am currently in the process of completing my senior thesis in order to complete my graduation requirements. I am trying to figure out what influences Division III student athletes to pick the schools that they do. I am sending this to you because you are listed as a student athlete according to the St. John Fisher College database. I would appreciate it if you took the time to fill out this short survey to assist in my research. This survey should take between 5-7 minutes and is only 8 questions long.

The information you give will be complete anonymous and your answers will never be traced back to you. I would like to thank you in advance for completing this survey and assisting me in my research and my final St. John Fisher assignment.

https://sjfc.us2.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_3CUWoEdfyY1iO5n

If you have any questions please don’t hesitate to contact myself at pds07899@sjfc.edu or Dr. Burakowski at kburakowski@sjfc.edu.

Sincerely,

Patrick Stellman
St. John Fisher College
Class of 2013
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Dr. Katharine Burakowski
St. John Fisher College
Assistant Professor
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Appendix Two
Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gather information on why student athletes choose to attend and play at Division III institutions. You are being asked to take this survey because you are a student athlete at St. John Fisher College. The purpose of this research is to help complete my senior thesis and successfully complete my graduation requirements. This survey is nine questions long and should take you no longer then 5-7 minutes. All answers you give are completely confidential and in no way can be traced back to you. There are only minimal risks with participating in this survey. Some risks may include teammates or coaches becoming aware that you participated in this survey. The information gathered by this survey is only for research purposes only and will not be used for any other purpose. By agreeing to these terms you allow me to use your answers to help determine why student athletes at St. John Fisher choose to attend and play at a Division III Institution. If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, contact the Office of Academic Affairs at (585) 385-8034 or the Wellness Center at (585) 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.

○ Agree
○ Disagree

Gender?

○ Male
○ Female

College Class (Determined my number of Credits Completed)

○ Freshman (0-29 Credits)
○ Sophomore (30-59 Credits)
○ Junior (60-89 Credits)
○ Senior (90+ Credits)
What Sport do you participate in? (Check All That Apply)

- Football
- Basketball
- Baseball
- Softball
- Lacrosse
- Golf
- Cross Country
- Track and Field (Indoor/Outdoor)
- Soccer
- Tennis
- Rowing
- Field Hockey
- Volleyball

Who was the Biggest Influence in your College Choice?

- Parents
- High School Teachers/Counselors
- Friends/Teammates
- College Coach
- College Advisers

What Athletic Factors influenced you in choosing St. John Fisher College? (Rank from Most Important to Least)

- Relationship with Coaches
- School Colors
- Athletic Facilities
- Prior Win/Loss Record
- Opportunity to Play
- Size of Campus/Class Size
- Degree Programs Offered
Other than Fisher, What other schools were you considering? (Name Three)

1.
2.
3.

When choosing a school what was more important, Academic Tradition or Athletic Prestige?

☑ Academic Tradition
☑ Athletic Prestige

What made Fisher the right choice for you to go to school and compete athletically? (Top 3 Factors)

1.
2.
3.

Thank You very much for taking the time to complete this survey and helping in my efforts to conduct my research and complete my senior thesis. If you have any questions about how your results will be used or if you’re concerned this project in general, feel free to contact SPST 499 professor Dr. Burakowski at kburakowski@sjfc.edu or Department Chair Dr. Todd Harrison at tharrison@sjfc.edu. If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. Thank You again for your participation.