

RECRUITING WITHOUT BORDERS:  
THE RISE OF TECHNOLOGY IN COLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

by

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## **Abstract**

This study focused on the role of technology and communication in the collegiate athletic recruiting process. It examines how recruiting methods have changed due to the developing advances of technology and the new methods of recruiting resulting from these changes.

Interviews were used to gather data on three research objectives: first to identify how the role of technology has increased in recruiting collegiate student-athletes over time, second to examine the differences in communication patterns in face-to-face recruiting interactions versus technological recruiting interactions, and third to determine if communication with potential student-athletes has improved or deteriorated with the rise of technology in the recruiting process. Both advantages and disadvantages of using technology for recruitment of collegiate student-athletes were found, but it is evident that the advantages predominate.

Potential implications for collegiate coaches and recruiting coordinators in better defining their technological recruitment communication strategies and developing more successful communication with potential recruits are discussed.

## **Introduction**

The creation of a successful sports team is the result of many factors; one fundamental component of successful college teams is the recruitment of the top athletes out of high school (Cummings et al., 2010). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) uses a variety of recruiting methods to impress potential student-athletes, whether they play soccer, football, or gymnastics. While the concept of recruiting is not new to college sports, the methods of recruiting have begun to evolve in response to the increasing technological climate of society. Traditionally, recruiting has been primarily a physical, tangible, face-to-face process. Computers, cell phones, and social media play a more important role in communication patterns of the next generation of student-athletes, and thus the ways in which these student-athletes communicate with potential athletic programs and coaches continues to change as a result. Collegiate athletic recruiting is evolving and recruiting student-athletes for teams has become an industry (Cummings & Lofaso, 2010) involving technology such as social media and recruitment websites. The pervasiveness of such technology allows recruiter-student interaction to happen anytime and anywhere. In this study, through interviews with collegiate coaches and recruiting staff, the way that coaches are using technology to recruit student-athletes as well as how the trend of technology in recruiting has evolved over time, will be investigated.

## **Literature Review**

Technology is constantly evolving. It is not enough to simply keep up with technological trends in today's culture; to stay on the leading edge it is essential to be at least

one step ahead. This need to be progressive with technology has seeped into athletic departments across the country. The overwhelming impact of modern technology on sports has caused many coaches and student-athletes to perceive information resulting from technological advances to be invaluable (Liebermann et al., 2002). New technological recruiting methods can be convenient and useful while recruiting student-athletes; however, is this trend in recruiting putting more emphasis on the technology than necessary?

### *Recruiting Overview*

The process of recruiting often varies from school to school, or even from coach to coach. While the NCAA maintains strict rules for when coaches are allowed to contact potential student-athletes, the entire process of recruiting is starting to be redefined by the use of technology in the overall process. Collegiate coaches who previously contacted student-athletes via letters in the traditional postal mail are now emailing or using social networking sites to initiate contact. According to the NCAA website (2010, para. 1), when referring to the use of technology in the recruiting process, “as technological initiatives increase, the Association recognizes the need for guidelines on the use of computers and the Internet in the recruiting process.” The NCAA has made an effort to regularly modify current legislation to include new technology in its rules for the recruiting process. For example, according to Bylaws 13.02.3 (contacts); 13.4.2 (NCAA Division I and II audio/visual materials); 13.1 (contacts and evaluations); and 13.01.6 (time periods for telephone calls and contacts) found on the NCAA website (2010, para. 16), “the subcommittee determined that it would be permissible for an institution's coaching staff member to engage in a face-to-face contact with a prospective student-athlete via a video conference or video telephone and that such

contact would constitute one of the three permissible contacts.” As more easily accessible forms of communication become available, the rules of contacting student-athletes will need to keep up with the changes.

As the communication methods chosen by prospective student-athletes continues to evolve so does the recruiting process. A new class of student-athletes is growing up with technology at their fingertips. As a result, colleges and universities are choosing to integrate technology into their recruiting process in a response to communicate effectively with this new generation (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2009). Fratt (2006) argues that colleges and universities have to find new ways to communicate messages to recruits. Instead of using traditional mail and phone calls, coaches are now using newer communication methods such as web tours, web cameras, webcasts, social networking sites, scouting and recruiting services, instant messaging, and e-mail.

Once colleges and universities start expressing interest in student-athletes, travel and financial issues typically follow suit. It can be difficult for student-athletes and their families to coordinate travel costs along with missing time from school and work. With distance sometimes being an issue, potential recruits/parents can access the schools’ websites to take a virtual tour of campus. In regard to this use of technology, face-to-face communication is lost in order to gain convenience; however, using the universities’ websites sets a tone for the school by acting as a window into campus life. This easily allows the recruit to become familiar with a school on his or her own terms. If the student-athlete gains interest via the web tour then it is highly likely that he or she will do an on-site campus visit later (Liberto, 2008). Potential recruits can now be contacted and recruited from thousands of miles away

without having to deal with the inconvenience of traveling. The use of web cameras and recruiting videos have helped coaches make a personal connection with prospective athletes, communicating without expending time and money to get an athlete and their family to campus for a visit. Additionally, video conferencing can also be used as another alternative to communicate with students from afar (Liberto, 2008). The use of a web camera is often still regarded as a face-to-face communication method since it is as close as one can to being in the room with someone without being physically present. It takes the concept of a traditional phone call one step further by allowing the parties involved to be able to see each other and by providing the availability of synchronous communication (Reushle & Loch, 2008).

As technology becomes increasingly more innovative, there are more opportunities to reach student-athletes over the Internet, which often include the broadcast of sporting events and faculty lectures. For example, at Newbury College in Brookline, MA, the administration encourages faculty to webcast lectures to send a positive message to visitors and potential recruits. This institution believes that the use of online programs can help prove to students that the faculty members are comfortable with the newest technology tools, which can provide a recruiting advantage for their school (Liberto, 2008). Likewise, Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, GA conducted a study to see if broadcasting different events on campus would be beneficial to the school. The university found that along with alumni and parents, high-school athletes were frequent viewers of their online sports events, which gives them a competitive edge over similar schools in obtaining prospects, particularly student-athlete prospects (Carnevale, 2007).

*Coaches and the Role of Technology*

Most sources report that institutions are using technology-related recruiting tools to captivate prospective students while planning to implement additional methods in the future (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2009). Santovec (2004) notes that the recruiter should not be worried about his or her comfort levels with technology; it is the prospective students' comfort level that matters the most when recruiting. Coaches need to adjust to and focus on how to communicate with the generation of their newest recruiting class. This means adapting forms of communication to keep up with the newest generation of technology-laden teenagers. Yeaton (2008) explains that the current generation of student-athletes being recruited has been coined as Generation Y, technology-savvy, multi-tasking individuals born between 1979 and 1994. Furthermore, she explains that these "digital natives" see computers as a part of life, a learning tool, and they have come to expect web presence since the Internet is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In fact, technology facilities were ranked at 40% on students' must-see list of facilities during a college visit (June, 2006).

Beyond recruiting, technology has begun to play an even larger role in the everyday responsibilities of athletic departments across the country. Weaver (2009) investigated how the Big Ten Network designed a specific marketing strategy to bring more attention to college athletics, as well as integrate technology into college athletics in general. The study examines the creation of the Big Ten Network and how television marketing brought the concept of utilizing technology to the forefront of college athletics. Fans, parents, and sports enthusiasts all want to stay connected with their favorite teams and athletes and with the creation of a technology tool, such as a television network like the Big Ten Network, collegiate athletics are being combined with technology. According to the breakdown of the

Big Ten Conference and Comcast's terms of their merger to create the network, the Big Ten Network would be available for distribution nationally 24 hours a day, seven days a week and it would focus primarily on sports of the Big Ten Conference (Weaver, 2009). As one of the first mergers of technology and college athletics, the Big Ten Network brought college athletics to a more accessible medium.

Technology has made a tremendous impact on the competitive arena of college athlete recruitment (Clapp, 2008). The recruiting process is rapidly changing as new forms of communication and technology are used to recruit. Collegiate coaches are acclimating themselves with technological tools for recruitment as an effort to be able to relate to today's student-athlete, as well as keep up with the competition, or even get ahead of the competition. While coaches and potential student-athletes may not come from the same generation of technology, there is room for the coaching staff to learn new forms of communication and to potentially expand their recruiting field to a limitless area of technology. Part of the coach's responsibility is knowing when and how to adjust recruiting techniques by studying student-athletes and discovering how they respond. The use of technology in this day and age is inevitable and the use of technology in collegiate recruiting is quickly becoming the best route for recruiting the best athletes for one's team.

#### *Social Media and Web-Based Recruiting*

Another technology platform that has continued to aid recruiters over the past few years is social networking websites. Sites such as Facebook and Twitter have been heavily utilized to help prospective student-athletes become associated with athletic programs. These social networking sites give student-athletes the ability to keep up with specific athletic

programs without being on campus. Unfortunately, there have been instances of people abusing social networking sites such as creating fake profiles and breaking NCAA regulations, among other behaviors. Stalkers have also negatively reached out to student-athletes on these sites, and unruly fans have used personal information that was acquired via a social networking site to taunt student-athletes during competition (Maher, 2007). The misuse of this technology is making it hard for the NCAA to regulate its use during the recruiting process. Some universities are even pursuing the idea of adding rules for social networking in their codes of conduct for student-athletes. Failure to comply would lead to serious consequences (Maher, 2007).

Scouting and recruiting web-based services are also being utilized by coaching staff to gain information on prospective recruits. Personal and professional websites post statistics and skills videos of student-athletes for recruiting purposes. Instead of sending out countless tapes to college coaches, student-athletes are quick to utilize these quicker and more convenient forms of connections to have multitudes of coaches see their potential. With personal websites, or even through email, coaches are able to give instant feedback and communicate with the student-athletes. The student-athlete is allowing the coach to get information and view video faster than using regular mail, which saves time and money (Hjerpe, 2009). Additionally, with only the price of an Internet connection to deal with, coaches are staying in their offices and watching hundreds of videos rather than dealing with expensive flights and long distance phone calls (Krause, 2007).

Convenience is a benefit, and likewise, coaches are also able to push their recruiting budgets further by using the Internet to view large numbers of potential recruits from around

the country (Krause, 2007). Therefore, the two most popular forms of communication between coaches and prospective recruits appear to be instant-messaging and email. Technology now opens up the doors to recruit athletes from around the country, not just within the recruiter's mailing area. College coaches have a chance to develop proficient recruiting systems while still being able to shrink their recruiting budgets by using current technology (Krause, 2007). Also, the student-athlete does not need to wait for his or her letter and skills video to cross state lines before the coach can view it, impacting the speed and breadth of recruitment.

### *Conclusion*

The impact that technology has had on the collegiate recruiting of student-athletes is inescapable. History shows that recruiting trends adapt as technology becomes increasingly more important for both student-athletes and coaches. Even though this paper has discussed both advantages and disadvantages of the blending of technology and recruiting, it is yet to be seen if the positive aspects of a more technological based recruiting system outweigh the negative aspects. While technological advances save time and money, broaden recruiting territories, and provide equal opportunities for student-athletes, there are also adverse concerns posed by technology. Has communication with potential student-athletes improved or deteriorated with the rise of technology in the recruiting process due to the constant stream of communication? Additionally, constant updates to NCAA legislation may leave some coaches in violation of rules based on consistent technological advances. Furthermore, it is essential that collegiate coaches learn how to use technology to improve their skills and abilities as recruiters on a continual basis. Recruiting has changed substantially from the time

most coaches were being recruited as athletes themselves, so it is important that adapt to the new technology. Keeping up with the trend of ever-changing technology makes coaches more apt to stay in tune with current generations' forms of communication. This also allows them to stay more competitive among their peers at different institutions across the country. If coaches can familiarize themselves and become comfortable with new and changing forms of communication, they have a better chance to make a quick connection with a potential student athlete, especially when they do not underestimate the level playing field that is created by the Internet (Weaver, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

Based in the rationale and literature presented, the present study investigated the following research questions:

RQ 1: How has the role of technology increased in recruiting collegiate student-athletes over time?

RQ 2: Are communication patterns the same in face-to-face recruiting interactions versus technological recruiting interactions?

RQ 3: Has communication with potential student-athletes improved or deteriorated with the rise of technology in the recruiting process?

### **Methods**

This research study was undertaken using qualitative interviewing methods, which examined the role of technology in athletic recruitment communication at a mid-sized rural university in the south. In accordance with Institutional Review Board guidelines ethical

approval was received prior to the start of this research. Coaches/recruiting staff were interviewed in their offices or the campus-based Learning Assistance Program (LAP) building. All respondents were between the ages of 18 to 50 and had been involved in athletics for at five years. I recruited my sample at a university by attending a coaching staff meeting and emailing coaches. Both job description and job title were used to screen eligibility. Because my respondents were seasoned veterans in athletic recruitment, inclusion criteria primarily focused primarily on previous recruitment experience (as a student-athlete) and recruitment experience as a coach. A purposive sample of five coaches and recruiting staff was obtained, with three males and two females between the ages of 25 and 70, recruiting in the fields of golf, softball, and tennis and working in recruitment via the compliance department. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted by the author in the fall of 2015 and lasted between one and 2.5 hours with a mean time of just over 70 minutes. Coaches/recruiting staff were interviewed individually in separate rooms to ensure confidentiality. Interview questions most relevant to this analysis focused on participants' recruiting experiences. For example, along with questions about which communication methods are used during the recruiting process, individuals were asked questions such as, "During the recruiting process, were conversations typically face-to-face or through other mediums?" and then were asked to elaborate specifically on their communication preferences in recruiting. Next, coaches were asked, "What trends do you see in collegiate athletic recruiting in regards to technology?" both in general and specifically in relation to their specific sport. A complete list of interview questions may be found in

Appendix A. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, with names withheld to protect confidentiality.

Notes were recorded by the researcher throughout each session and were transcribed in more detail immediately afterward to enable reflection and to analyze key themes as accurately as possible for a thick description and a reliable representation of the data. During the analysis process the researcher listened to the recordings and reviewed the notes up to five times to accurately draw comparisons between several themes using standard coding procedures for qualitative data (Patton, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Analysis**

The aim of this research was to investigate the role of technology in collegiate athletic recruitment. At the end of the research period the combined data collected during the interviews with coaches and recruiting staff was manually qualitatively analyzed using generative criticism and color-coded for initial themes, and then regrouped to establish emergent themes, based in the three research questions presented. This method of data analysis invariably involves some data being discarded as the sheer volume would not allow discussion of every area in this small-scale study (Robson, 2011). However, the themes of “work-life balance,” “social media usage,” “Jump Forward,” and “prospect exposure” were chosen because of their prominence throughout the interviews and resulting coding analysis.

### *Work-Life Balance*

Most of the codes were consolidated into a theme I called “Work-Life Balance.” Participants expressed the need to establish work-life balance when it came to the use of technology and athletic recruitment. Given that technology is always available at our fingertips, most coaches found it difficult to put their smart phones away after leaving the office. Participants often cited NCAA recruiting regulations as being strict in order to help coaches establish work-life balance, rather than being put in place to protect prospects. As the Director of Compliance put it:

I think those rules were put in place mainly for work-life balance for coaches-so they wouldn't be expected to call prospects seven days a week.

Still, interestingly, regulations also were cited to heavily interfere with this balance for coaches. In each NCAA sport, there is a specific date in an athlete's high school career where he or she may be contacted by prospective schools. After that permissible contact date in every sport except for football and track and field, there are unlimited phone calls and text messages allowed. Participants often felt as if unlimited phone calls and text messages lead to pressure to consistently be in contact with potential recruits. This feeling of being connected to recruits was often tied to the need of coaches and recruiting staff to feel as if their athletic programs were staying relevant. When asked if the participants felt that universities needed to utilize technology to stay competitive with other schools one participant replied:

I think so. I think ultimately that's how you stay relevant in anything. You can see it in just the business world nowadays just in how companies have to stay ahead of Twitter and create different followings, just to stay out there and be a relevant brand nowadays. That's really no different for colleges and universities.

During the course of the research it appeared that one of the only negative connotations with technology and athletic recruitment was being able to find a work-life balance. Participants discussed how it was hard to disconnect from technology, whether it was related to athletic recruitment or just general technology use. One of the participants mentioned deleting or deactivating personal social media accounts due to the amount of time he spent on the sites.

Technology as it has advanced has probably created more of an issue with coaches thinking they always have to be on it [social media] to be relevant. They always have to be tweeting something, or connecting with recruits, again within the rules, to make sure they're staying on their [the prospect's] radar or the recruit is staying interested in their program.

Despite the fact that all of the participants mentioned technology creating a barrier to work-life balance, they all agreed that it was important to use technology in order to communicate with potential recruits. Through taking advantage of the NCAA regulations on communicating with recruits, some of the coaches are starting to find the balance between working to recruit prospects during the day and being able to turn off the technology once they leave the office.

### *Social Media Usage*

A majority of the participants had previously been student-athletes and were able to discuss notable changes in the use of social media during the recruiting process. In recalling his own recruitment experience one participant noted that only snail mail and phone calls to his landline house phone were used. Printed questionnaires were most often used to establish initial contact and then phone calls were used to maintain contact with potential recruits. He recalled:

There were no electronic questionnaires, 2001 was not the dark ages of the Internet or anything but it was pre online submission forms and everything like that – at least for the recruiting world. I filled out a lot of paper questionnaires. I sent letters, handwritten letters, to programs that I was interested in playing for.

Now, with the abundance of online communication methods, all participants expressed the need to be able to communicate with recruits via social media outlets. Generation Y, the current generation of potential recruits, is often cited as wanting to be in constant contact with others and being the most prominent generation of technology users. This trend has led coaches and recruiting staff to learn about different types of social media and how to use these sites in a proficient and professional manner. One participant cited his thoughts regarding even recent rapid changes in communication, Facebook being partially eclipsed by Twitter and other more recent platforms:

I guess with social media becoming more popular you know coaches have had to learn how to use it to keep up with how students want to be contacted nowadays.

Facebook was a cool thing that people were putting together, but people still weren't using it to communicate with one another, but several years later it wasn't text messages and phone calls it was hey just send me a Facebook message. It [Facebook] was kind of the thing and now Twitter direct messaging and Instagram and that kind of stuff has really become the preferred method of communication for a lot of recruits.

While NCAA regulations focus heavily on text messaging and phone calls there is little legislation on social media interaction between coaches and potential recruits. According to the participants, the majority of prospects would rather text message or communicate via social media instead of talking on the phone. A few years ago the NCAA de-regulated text message communication with men's basketball to gain insight into how prospects wanted to keep in contact with universities. Men's basketball served as the testing ground for what turned out to be successful de-regulation of text messages and phone calls, paving the way for the majority of NCAA sports to have unlimited contact using specific communication mediums. As one participant described it,

For a couple of year's basketball – men's basketball, especially – was the first sport to deregulate telephone communication, so phone calls and text messages. It seemed like prospects liked text messaging more. For example, if I audit a coach's phone record tomorrow it seems like prospects are text messaging more than they are picking up the phone calls. Seeing again you're seeing more text messages and social media messaging than phone conversations nowadays.

Even though communication via social media seems to be becoming the more favored

form of contact between coaches and prospects, some participants argued that face-to-face communication is still the most convincing medium. The coaches suggest that athletic recruitment functions much like any other industry you would find in the United States. Whether you're walking across campus to discuss housing options for student-athletes or meeting a recruit for the first time, the participants stated that meeting with someone face-to-face is going to be a much more effective way to communicate. As stated by a tennis coach,

So ultimately I think always the big sale for recruits is coming on campus and having the face-to-face interaction with the coach or having a coach go to a prospect's home to do a home visit – to talk about the program and sell the program face to face. It will always be the biggest sale rather than just online communication.

Additionally, multiple participants discussed that while communicating with recruits via social media is important, it is also critical to establish personal connections with recruits interested in your athletic program. It is important to note that establishing personal connections in the athletic recruitment environment typically happens in two ways: campus visits and home visits. Bringing a prospect to campus allows for a multitude of face-to-face communication opportunities between coaches, players, athletic staff, and the prospect. However, if multiple schools are heavily recruiting a prospect many coaches make the home visit a priority. While communication via social media appears to be becoming a prominent trend, as illustrated by this participant, there is still plenty of importance placed on face-to-face communication with recruits:

Top prospects that are being recruited by multiple schools, from what I've seen, [home visits] are something that coaches will make a priority. Like I said with all the technology and with all the sports culture in different sports, regardless of how technology has changed I think the biggest sell will always be sitting down face to face and having that conversation.

### *Jump Forward*

During the data collection the role of technology in athletic recruitment was mentioned with regard to communication with prospects, but also in relation to how the NCAA monitors recruitment interactions. The university where the data was collected uses software called *Jump Forward* as a recruitment-monitoring tool. All of the participants mentioned this software as a useful tool for holding themselves accountable for monitoring compliance with NCAA recruitment regulations. In addition, as this participant describes, *Jump Forward* serves as an Internet-based database that stores information about every prospect the university is interested in recruiting:

On the compliance end, we use *Jump Forward* which is a compliance software that helps coaches not only manage a recruiting database so they can keep all sorts of notes about who they're recruiting and some athletic profile information.

The participants mentioned that this software was helpful in the recruiting process because all of the information about prospects is easily stored on one large hard drive that can be accessed from anywhere in the United States. Not only does this software house important information about a recruit's athletic ability, but it also serves as a useful tool for coaches to

determine if a recruit is even academically eligible to attend the university. By keeping all of this information in one place, the participants felt as if technology was making the recruiting process easier because they didn't have to remember every single detail about each recruit in their heads:

It could be height, weight, how fast they are, how fast they jump, whatever. But also some academic profile information such as the prospect's GPA and they can put transcripts there and have everything about the prospect academically, and then of course contact information.

Technology such as *Jump Forward* and other software also serves as a tool for compliance officers who report to the university and the NCAA about recruitment infractions. One participant commented on how recruiters from each athletic program have an app on their computers and cell phones that automatically logs contact with potential recruits, noting that they "house all of that information in there so it's a very good compliance tool for the recruiting process as well just to document recruiting activities." Thus, this is helpful not only for coaches, who don't have to manually enter some information, but also for compliance as the software generates detailed call logs.

The communication logs that are generated by *Jump Forward* include a wide variety of information about the type of contact between a coach and a prospect. Each log includes the name of the prospect, which coach made contact, both phone numbers, and the duration of the call. There are also spaces for coaches to include what was discussed, which is often utilized. All of the participants mentioned that they preferred to write what was discussed

during the contact incase another recruiting staff member had to make additional contact in the future. It was also helpful for them to remember what had been discussed to avoid being repetitious while communicating with recruits:

It's also a great tool to help us track compliance wise where coaches can log phone calls to that prospect, they can submit an official visit request - that's documented when someone's coming on campus. They can also look to see if that prospect has signed whether it is an agreement, a national letter of intent, or whether they've signed their acceptance agreement with the university.

Traditionally when technology in athletic recruitment is discussed the topic mainly centers on the use of communication mediums, such as phones and the Internet, to communicate with potential recruits. However, according to the data it appears that technology plays a larger role in the recruiting process than one would imagine. It is through the use of the *Jump Forward* technology that coaches and compliance staff are bridging a gap between physical recruitment activities and the monitoring process.

### *Prospect Exposure*

Technology in athletic recruitment is not just a tool utilized by coaches and recruiting staff at numerous colleges across the country; it is also being used by prospects to gain exposure. Previously recruits had to spend a great deal of their time sending handwritten letters to the athletic programs they were interested in because technology was limited. Unless a top high school athlete in the state or region, having coaches reach out to a prospect was rare. One participant reflected on the process of writing to schools:

I sent letters, handwritten letters, to programs that I was interested in playing for. I probably did that for 8-10 different programs just around the Carolinas that I thought it would be cool to play for. I would send my schedule; I was on a fall team kind of like a travel team that played once a week in area tournaments. So I would send my schedule, write a letter to the coach – “Hey I want to be a part of your program would love to come visit sometime.”

Once the prospect made initial contact with an athletic program, it would be up to the coach to make further contact, whether that was through a phone call or planning a scouting visit. Participants who had previously been student-athletes discussed the fact that athletic recruitment used to be very prospect driven. They explained this as meaning that prospects had to make a good effort to get noticed by the athletic programs in which they were interested. Many times participants discussed how they would ask to be brought to campus to establish face-to-face communication:

If I wrote Virginia Tech, which I did, and said I would love to come up and visit your program sometime, it would be awesome and I would love to be a part of your program, they would send me a mailing in return with a questionnaire to fill out for more information on me.

As the role of technology in athletic recruiting continues to become more prevalent it appears that coaches and recruiting staff now have to be more proactive during the recruiting process. There seems to be a shift toward athletic programs trying to gain attention from the prospect, instead of the prospect trying to make contact with the athletic program. While this

may not apply in all athletic recruiting cases there has been an increase in this type of behavior. Participants attributed this trend to technology:

It was harder to get exposure. I actually made a DVD of my playing highlights and mailed it to a program. Prospects still do that, but they also have YouTube videos and simple ways to get their information and playing highlights out now compared to then.

Since many prospects are using technological communication methods such as YouTube and personal websites, coaches and recruiting staff are inundated with a large volume of highlight reels. However, some participants still encourage high school athletes to reach out to athletic programs they want to play for because it puts them on a “coach’s radar” in a different way. While it is easy for coaches to comb through the film they find online, when a prospect directly contacts their program, they know the athlete is interested. What was once normal is now a way to stand out, due to technology becoming the new norm:

So with prospects now I still give the advice when I do high school camps and things like that to contact the programs you are interested in because ultimately a coach is going to say “okay, well this is a prospect that really wants to come to my university, so let me check and see if they qualify athletically and academically to be a student-athlete here.”

In the past there was a larger chance of the recruiting process being driven by the prospect instead of the athletic program. Currently, with the state of technology and its use in the athletic recruiting world, there are a wide variety of ways that prospects and programs

can get in touch with each other. While the participants still believe that a large majority of potential recruits are still contacting programs individually, the chances of getting noticed before a prospect shows interest is rising. In the end, it appears that if a prospect wants to attend a university they will somehow find a way for their highlight reel to make its way on the coaches' desk.

But ultimately with the different ways student-athletes now can be exposed as a prospect it's almost like your chances of being seen before you show interest are much greater now than they were back then.

### **Summary of Findings**

Incorporating relevant studies from the literature and the data from the five interviews, this study explored the topic of the technology and communication in collegiate athletic recruitment. There has been a substantial increase in the role of technology throughout the athletic recruitment process in the last few years. The literature suggested that this may be caused by fact that social media and other technological media have been growing over the last decade and coaches/recruiting staff have been more concerned with using them to communicate with potential recruits. Through the research it was found that a majority of collegiate athletic recruits prefer to be contacted through social media rather than talk on the phone with the programs they are interested in. Additionally, it is not only schools that are using technological communication to their advantage in the recruitment process. Findings suggest that potential recruits are using mediums such as YouTube and personal websites to showcase their talents, which often leads to them being contacted by athletic

programs instead of the other way around. This prospect-initiated interaction helps to break down the intimidation factor that often comes along with waiting for an athletic program to make initial contact during recruitment. It provides an expressive outlet for recruits while also letting coaches know that a prospect is interested in the program.

While the literature shows that using technology during the recruiting process is becoming more prevalent, the researcher also discovered that it is a tool being used by compliance. Findings showed that many coaches use the Internet-based program *Jump Forward* to keep track of statistics and contact with potential recruits. This unexpected use of technology during the recruitment process further establishes the increasing dominance of technological communication media in this setting. Using *Jump Forward* as a compliance communication tool allows the compliance department to audit a wealth of information all at once and can help identify red flags, a technological tool that can help both coaches and athletic departments avoid potential NCAA violations. Through the use of literature and qualitative analysis one of the only negative themes that emerged was the difficulty of work-life balance. Almost all of the coaches found it difficult to turn off their cellphones and computers at the end of the day, feeling as if they had to stay in recruitment mode all of the time. However, with NCAA regulations put in place to limit contact with recruits there seems to be a shift toward coaches / recruiting staff finding an appropriate balance between their personal and professional lives. Finding balance and engaging in restraint with the use of recruitment technology after the work day ends, makes it possible for coaches to take a mental break and take a step back from their recruitment duties. The balance of work and

professional life does help coaches feel more recharged and thus allows them to do a more thorough job while recruiting student-athletes.

## **Limitations**

This study began to examine the role of technology in the communication process of athletic recruitment. Although the research has reached its aims, there were some unavoidable limitations and there is still much to be learned about the topic. First of all, given that the sample required was a specialized, purposive one, coaches or recruiting staff in collegiate athletics, a small sample size is likely to be a given. However, the sample size was likely further reduced with the time restriction of one semester. Also, since the fall is a particularly busy time for collegiate athletic departments, the researcher was not able to interview as many participants as desired. In addition, collegiate athletics appears to be a field dominated by men and because of this, as well as the fall timeframe and its seasonal sports being predominately coached by males, most of the participants interviewed were also male.

Therefore, to generalize the results to collegiate athletic recruiting as a whole the study should have involved more participants from multiple schools and sports; given the dearth of research on this topic, this issue may be remedied in future work. Furthermore, to better understand how coaches use technology to communicate during athletic recruitment, future research should also look at both female and male coaches. Additionally, there has been a limited amount of research about the topic of technology and its role in communication during collegiate athletic recruitment. Due to the fact that there were not a

large number of resources on this topic the literature review may need to be updated as more research becomes available. While many of the sources are still relevant, as technology continues to become more prevalent in athletic recruitment, more timely sources will be able to shed light on the current state of technology in athletic recruitment. Future research should also explore the continued role of technology in athletic recruitment, technological communication styles of coaches and recruitment staff, and use of technology in Division I, II, and III programs.

## **Conclusion**

From the preliminary findings, the researcher found that the use of technology in collegiate athletic recruitment communication possesses some different characteristics than the communication in a face-to-face recruitment. For instance, an online technological medium such as Twitter allows athletic recruits to have more control over their levels of participation and provides them with more time to develop thoughtful communication topics with coaches. However, the lack of visual and tonal clues and context information leads some recruits to believe that there is a lack of individualization in the communication, a situation that can lead both coaches and potential recruits to some potential conflicts. Facing similar difficulties and sharing common interests were the initial factors that encouraged the coaches / recruiting staff to learn how to use social media to communicate with recruits. Being supportive of and engaging in meaningful conversations with recruits, both in person and via technology, makes it possible for good relationships to develop. The social interaction does help to break down the barriers due to physical distance. It provides mutual support and

offers a frame of reference for recruits' reflections, thus contributing to the overall recruitment process.

This exploration of the use of technology in collegiate athletic recruitment provides some insights to technology use from coaches' and other recruitment staffs' perspectives. The results indicate that coaches should continue to utilize technology in their communication with recruits, while also remembering the importance of traditional face-to-face communication. A positive relationship with recruits comes with the coaches' ability to adjust their style of communication to whichever medium the recruit prefers to use while communicating. However, social interaction is a multi-faceted dynamic process that is impacted by many factors, such as recruits' personality characteristics, subject content, athletic department recruitment strategies, and technological interface. Limited by the sample size and specific conditions of athletic recruitment, the findings from this study are subject to variance from other studies based on different sizes of athletic departments and samples. Moreover, this study raises additional questions related to the research topic. For example, what is the relationship between recruits' personalities and social media usage patterns? How does the communication interaction change with the recruitment progress? To what extent does the communication interaction affect the recruits' satisfaction with a particular athletic program? These are all significant questions that call for further study. It is hoped that future researchers can reference the findings from this study and investigate these questions on the topic of technology in collegiate athletic recruitment. These investigations can eventually contribute to the improvement of the quality of athletic recruitment, as well as coaches/recruitment staff's use of technology during the recruitment process.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

- 1) Were you a student-athlete in college? If so, please describe your experience of being recruited.
- 2) What methods of contact were used to communicate between yourself and prospective schools?
- 3) During the recruiting process, were the conversations typically face-to-face or through other mediums?
- 4) Currently, what methods of communication do you use with prospective student athletes and their families during the recruiting process?
- 5) Does the NCAA restrict or limit the type of communication you can have with prospective students while recruiting?
- 6) What trends do you see in collegiate athletic recruiting in regards to technology?
- 7) If you had to choose between face-to-face communication or communication through other electronic mediums (social media, phone calls, text messages, websites, videos, etc.) which method do you prefer?
- 8) Why do you think that the use of technology during the recruiting process has exploded over the last several years?
- 9) Do you believe that potential recruits respond more positively to face-to-face communication or communication through other mediums?
- 10) Is recruiting style determined by each coach/team or does the athletic department lay the foundation for what you should do?
- 11) Do you think that colleges and universities need to utilize technology in the recruiting process in order to stay competitive with other schools?
- 12) Does your sport have a specific department/personnel that deals with recruiting?
- 13) What benefits, if any, have you discovered while using technology during the recruiting process?
- 14) What downfalls, if any, have you discovered while using technology during the recruiting process?