Gender differences in the NJCAA college selection process by student-athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Background: Every year, college coaching staffs spend numerous hours tracking and recruiting prospective student-athletes. Recruitment and retention of student-athletes are among the most important tasks of a college coach. The National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) in 2017 reported that there were 36,411 male student-athletes and 22,785 female student-athletes in 26 sports (Student-athlete participation statistics, 2016-2017). Surprisingly, only two studies have been conducted with this population regarding the recruitment process. This knowledge gap prevents coaches from building a marketing plan that will help them successfully recruit and retain student-athletes.
Purpose: This study examined the college selection process and identified the most important factors influencing NJCAA student-athletes in the college selection process. Methods: An invitation letter was sent to athletic directors of NJCAA institutions together with the College Selection Process Scale (CSPS), as well as a link to Survey Monkey. Athletic directors invited their student-athletes to participate in the study. One hundred and sixty-three (77 males and 74 females) student-athletes from Division I NJCAA Colleges took part in this study. Student-athletes (71.5% White) who responded to this survey participated in 14 different sports. An exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the factor structure of the CSPS. A one-way MANOVA was used to examine the effect of gender (males versus females) on Athletic Experience, Athletic Program, Academics, and Outside Influence. A one-way ANOVA was utilized for all post hoc analyses and mean difference comparisons.
Results: The results of the exploratory factor analysis indicated that the CSPS should include 23 items under four factors: Athletic Experience (5 items), Athletic Program (6 items), Academics (6 items), and Outside Influence (6 items). These four factors explained 52.6% of the total variance, and their Cronbach alpha coefficients were .775, .869, .880, and .804, respectively. Results of the one-way MANOVA indicated the model was significant with a medium to large effect size and huge power ($F_{[4, 146]} = 4.395$, $p = .002$; Wilks's $\Lambda = .893$, partial $\eta^2 = .107$, power = .929). Post-hoc univariate ANOVAs showed that females had significantly higher Outside Influence mean scores than their male counterparts ($F_{[1, 149]} = 7.289$, $p = .008$). Overall, females emphasized the importance of "distance from permanent home" as well as the "influence of parents" and "location of the school" during their college selection process.
Conclusion: The results of the study showed a new trend in factors influencing the college selection process. Overall, the five most important items for student-athletes were: (a) academic support, (b) degree leading to a good job, (c) institution offered an academic program of interest, (d) academic reputation of the department of your desired major, and (e) level of competition. These items should create a basis for coaches' marketing and recruiting strategies. However, adjustments to the strategies should be made by coaches to successfully recruit student-athletes of a specific gender.