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THIS THESIS

NCAA DIVISION III CROSS COUNTRY RECRUITMENT THROUGH THE LENS
OF THE SIGNALING THEORY AND FRAMING THEORY: A QUALITATIVE
STUDY

By
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Abstract

Recruiting quality student-athletes is the lifeline for college athletic programs all over the country. This thesis critically examines the NCAA Division III cross country recruitment process with a keen focus on discovering the most effective recruiting tactics. A qualitative method approach combined with signaling theory and framing theory provided the lens to study a case study institution. Individual interviews of the student-athletes and coaches of the case study institution were used to produce the data necessary for the study. Themes that emerged as effective recruiting tactics were: personalization of recruiting through mediums and communication, creation of a comfort level, comparison recruiting, appeal recruiting, and pushing “success”. Student-athletes were most influenced by the personalization, creation of a comfort level, and appeal recruiting. Male student-athletes were found to be more influenced by the appeal recruiting tactic while females found the creation of a comfort level with an emphasis on support to be very influential. In addition, coaches found pushing “success” and comparison recruiting to be effective recruiting tactics.

Keywords: Collegiate Recruiting, Signaling Theory, Framing Theory, Minimization of Information Asymmetry
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Introduction

Recruitment of college athletes is a complex activity featuring a diverse group of factors. Recruiting is an unsolved equation that includes but is not limited to talent, fortitude, health, personality, success, and academic prowess (Sturtz, 2013). This complex equation is a key aspect to the overall success of any collegiate program. The ability to populate a program with highly talented and dedicated individuals puts one’s program in a situation to succeed. The coaches and their coaching staff have the responsibility to have a successful program. This responsibility creates a sense of pressure on the coaches to recruit high-quality student-athletes for their program. In cross country, coaches are constantly being judged on not only how their teams perform, but also what type of recruits they are attracting to their institution, what type of grades these student-athletes are earning, how they treat their staff, how they organize activities and events, and how they handle adversity. NCAA Division III coaches are expected to put in at least 20 hours a week on recruiting (Northuis, 2016).

The description above is not exhaustive, but it does demonstrate the pressure that comes along with being a college cross country coach. Although there are many factors that contribute to success or failure (championships, individual personal bests, winning) for cross-country coaches, being able to recruit talented individuals is vital to compete at a high-level. Mark Northuis is the current Head Cross Country/ Head Track and Field Coach at Hope College. According to Mark Northuis, it is “tough to make chicken salad without chickens. Recruiting student-athletes who match your program is key to having a successful program. You need to have student-athletes who are at least a good fit for your institution and program so they will have an above average chance of developing into a top runner” (Northuis, 2016). Furthermore, when asked about what percentage of coaching at the college level is recruiting, Mark Northuis
said “Recruiting is just the start, but it is crucial. If you get great high school runners to come, you can have instant success, especially on the women's side. I would say it is over 50% of the coaching” (Northuis, 2016).

The impact of recruiting talented student-athletes can be seen in both success and failure of the recruitment process. If the coach and staff succeed in recruiting talented individuals to their institution the result, in most cases, will be a success. Conversely, the failure to recruit talented individuals to one's institution will result, in most cases, failure. According to Caro, 63-80% of success was because of the variance in recruiting amongst the institutions he studied (2012). Furthermore, a recruitment cycle can be created where success on the field can lead to greater success in recruiting. Which then, creates a cycle that leads to continued success in the future (Dumond, Lynch, & Platania, 2008).

Inquiry

Three specific reasons limit this research to NCAA Division III. Firstly, NCAA Division III highlights a unique variable in recruiting athletes. That variable is the inability of the NCAA Division III institutions to offer forms of financial aid based on athletic skills and prowess (NCAA, 2016). Therefore, this notion creates a definitive distinction between Division III and Division I/II (both can offer financial aid based on athletic skills). Thus, different recruiting tactics and framing of said tactics play a more vital role in the recruiting process when monetary compensation is eliminated from the recruiting process (Konnert & Giese, 1987). Secondly, Division III institutions often compete in recruiting for the same athletes with Division II institutions and in fewer cases Division I institutions. The ability to recruit these higher-level athletes to attend a, competitively, lower level institution is a significant attribute in a coach at
the Division III level. Finally, while there are other governing organizations for collegiate cross-country such as the National Junior College Athletics Association (NJCAA), the National Christian College Athletics Association (NCCAA), and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), NCAA is the oldest and most popular in participation as well as fan support of the associations (NCAA, 2016).

Recruiting quality student-athletes is the lifeline for college programs all over the country. The ability to understand and to manipulate the many facets that present themselves with college recruiting puts one’s program in a situation to succeed. While the previous statement sounds simple, in reality, college recruiting is a subject matter that is still in its infancy from a scholarly research perspective. Thus, the perfect strategy or potential tactic is far from being discovered. Although studies have been done to a limited degree and a foundation has been established, they have not been conducted through a communication framework that is concerned with the transmission of the tactics being utilized. A communication framework offers a more in-depth analysis of the discourse associated with recruiting and provides a definitive framework to discover answers for practical implications.

This study’s objective is to inspect the recruitment of potential student-athletes by examining a successful NCAA Division III cross country program in order to determine the most consistently effective recruitment strategies utilized as well as the transmission of these tactics in order to recruit high-quality student-athletes. The utilization of signaling theory and framing theory will provide a framework in order to achieve these objectives and study the college recruiting process in a different perspective that focuses not only on the broad tactic but the transmission in which the tactic is being presented.
An introductory understanding of the principles and legislation of the NCAA will be necessary in order to examine the context of collegiate cross country recruiting. As such, a brief framework for understanding the NCAA and its bylaws regarding Division III cross-country recruiting will be provided. Also, a review of the previous research done in the field of college athletic recruiting and tactics affecting the college decision-making process will be presented. Furthermore, a detailed examination of the previous research done on signaling theory and framing theory will be presented.
Chapter 1 Literature Review

NCAA

The Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS) was created in December 1905. Seven years later in 1912, the name was changed to National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (Barr, 1999). However, the competitive divisions were not delineated for another 67 years. In 1973, the association's membership was divided into three legislative and competitive divisions (I, II, III). Each division has a separate board of directors, committees, and management councils (Laird, 2008). The NCAA shares a belief and commitment to seven core values. They are as follows: the collegiate model of athletics, integrity/sportsmanship, excellence in academics and athletics, the supporting role that intercollegiate athletics plays, an inclusive culture, respect, and presidential leadership (NCAA, 2016). Included in the efforts to abide by these core values, each division is required to uphold the Constitution, Operational Bylaws, and Administration Bylaws that make up that division's manual, which is updated and altered yearly (Laird, 2008). The 2015-2016 NCAA Division III Manuel features 282 pages covering all aspects of Division III policy. Furthermore, Article 13 features 16 bylaws spanning 17 pages on recruiting alone (NCAA, 2015). Cross country has its own regulations rulebook that spans 130 pages (NCAA, 2015). In order to be allowed to recruit as a member of a NCAA affiliated institution, every NCAA coach must pass (minimum of 80%) a certification test, which is administered on a monthly basis. If a coach fails to pass, he/she must wait for the next test, which will cost the coach valuable recruiting and evaluation time (Laird, 2008).

Success in Cross Country

Cross Country is a team sport where athletes run for a predetermined distance and are
scored based on where they finished in the race. In high school, a cross country race is a 5000-meter race (6 states have women run 3200-4000 meters) while intercollegiate races span from a 6000-meter (female collegiate runners) through a 10,000-meter race (Division I, II championship events). Furthermore, Division III males run 8000-meter races (Sturtz, 2015). The scoring of a cross-country race is based on the finish of the institution’s top five runners. For example, if a team placed their top five runners at 1st, 6th, 9th, 12th, and 24th, the team’s total score would be 52 points. The team with the lowest score determines the winner of the meet. In the event of a tie, the tiebreaker is decided by which team’s sixth runner finished faster. The “perfect score” in cross-country is 15; the team would individually finish first, second, third, fourth, and fifth.

With a preliminary understanding of the cross-country scoring system established, the ability to create a working definition for a successful cross country team in terms of winning championships is possible. In a basic sense, a successful cross country team has the best five runners at the competition. Unfortunately, this scenario rarely happens, and is even rarer at the intercollegiate level. Thus, strategies are established in order to have a successful team. The first strategy involves a combination of “front-runners” and “backline runners.” The “front-runners” are runners that finish in the upper echelon of the competition, while “backline runners” can finish between closely outside the top 10 through the first 100 runners. The more successful teams have “backline runners” that have few positions between themselves and the “front-runners.” While this strategy can be successful, it involves having certain student-athletes that are superior in talent than a vast majority of other runners at the competition, which for some programs can be difficult to recruit. The other main cross country strategy is commonly referred to as “pack running.” “Pack running” refers to a team that has very few positions between all 1-5 runners. This strategy does not require “front-runners” to be successful, thus many teams strive
for effective “pack running.” One of the most successful high school coaches, Bill Aris of Fayetteville-Manlius High School (NY) utilizes this strategy often. His teams tend to lack definitive “front-runners” but have a small spread between his five runners. For example, during the 2014 campaign his individual runners finished 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, and 20th respectively, winning the team championship (Helliker, 2014).

There are different strategies to a successful cross country team, but a common thread is apparent. Cross country teams that have a relatively small spread between runners 1-5 and feature all their scoring runners finishing moderately close to the front-runners. In turn, this will be a successful cross country team in terms of winning championships. On the contrary, a successful cross-country team cannot simply be just one great runner; instead, it takes a quality group of five runners to be a successful team. Thus, a coach is placed in a position to not only recruit “superstar” runners but also, recruit runners to fill the other scoring positions on the team.

**Intercollegiate Recruiting**

In addition to the divisions within the NCAA, each division consists of further separations of affiliated participating institutions, called conferences. Each conference has its own governing body, rules, regulations, membership requirements, and season of competition within the overall season (Laird, 2008). Within NCAA Division III, there are 43 member conferences and 450 participating institutions; making Division III the largest division in the NCAA. In addition, Division II has 307 participating schools and Division I has 346 participating schools (NCAA, 2015). Each division has slightly different regulations to follow in the context of recruiting. Even with all the differences in recruiting regulations, all the divisions must wait until the completion of the potential student-athlete’s sophomore year to initiate contact with the recruit. Once
institutions have established contact with a student-athlete a “recruiting cycle” will occur. The “recruiting cycle” is different for the student-athlete and the coach. The “recruiting cycle” for coaches consists of common actions used within a particular order to recruit potential student-athletes. While the “recruiting cycle” for student-athletes consists of the common actions taken by the student-athlete to make a decision on which institution to attend. In these upcoming sections, the primary rules for recruiting for each division will be presented, as well as, a more in-depth overview of the “recruiting cycle”.

**Division I and Division II Recruiting.** As mentioned earlier, Division III institutions are prohibited from offering financial aid for athletic ability and prowess, while Division I and Division II institutions are allowed to offer financial aid for athletic ability and prowess. 53 percent of student-athletes in Division I receive athletic aid while 56 percent of student-athletes receive athletic aid in Division II (NCAA, 2015). The immense advantage in recruiting that athletic scholarships give to Division I and Division II institutions cannot be underestimated. In Division I cross country, each program can offer 12.6 full scholarships for men and 18 for women. In Division II cross country, each program can offer 12.6 full scholarships for men and women (NCAA, 2015). With the ability to offer financial scholarships based on athletic prowess, Division II and I utilize stricter contact policies than Division III to attempt to create a fair recruiting environment for the institutions involved. Thus, Division II and I have concrete times (quiet period, dead period, evaluation period) during the year when they can contact prospects.

**Division III Recruiting.** Division III institutions are placed at a disadvantage compared to the other divisions in recruiting because of the inability to offer athletic scholarships. Furthermore, Division III institutions tend to have smaller monetary budgets resulting in fewer coaches and smaller facilities. Division III institutions tend to be smaller institutions with an
average undergraduate enrollment of 1790 per institution; putting them at another disadvantage compared to the larger Division II and I institutions (NCAA, 2016). However, Division III institutions have recruiting advantages in the unlimited amount of contact to potential student-athletes. Division III institutions have unlimited numbers of telephone calls, emails, off-campus contact, and evaluations while the other divisions have more concrete limitations (NCAA, 2015). Thus, the recruiting environment in Division III is much different from the other divisions. Coaches have the possibility of extending contact to recruits at all times after the conclusion of the potential student-athlete’s sophomore year in high school, allowing them to send messages to recruits more often than the other divisions. This notion gives coaches the opportunity to potentially minimize the information asymmetry between the parties involved better than the other divisions. Information asymmetry describes the difference in knowledge bases between the parties involved in the exchange. A more in-depth definition will be presented on page 25. In addition, the Division III recruiting process is not a “bidding” war where the student-athlete attends the school that can guarantee the most funds through athletic scholarships like in Division I and II. Division III recruiting is a process of minimizing the information gap between the parties involved. Furthermore, the process becomes an exchange between the coach and student-athlete. The coach utilizes persuasive strategies, while the potential student-athlete is deciphering and responding to these strategies. This process is potentially further strengthened by the unlimited amount of contact given to coaches and recruiters at the Division III level. Thus, it can be argued that Division III recruiting allows for the purest recruiting to take place within the context of signaling theory.

**Recruiting Cycle**

Within the competitive world of NCAA Division III recruiting a "recruiting cycle" occurs.
The recruiting cycle is a common set of events or actions that happen in a set order. The recruiting cycle contains the coach's portion along with the potential student athlete's portion.

**Recruiting Cycle for Coaches.** Coaches do not base their recruiting decisions on precise facts or formulas (Feldman, 2007). Instead, coaches develop a skill for evaluation of talent. In addition, coaches may base their recruiting decisions on experiences, personal beliefs, or even stereotypes (Thomas, Good & Gross, 2015). The recruiting cycle begins after the conclusion of the potential student-athlete's sophomore year in high school. The coaches will send initial letters and recruiting questionnaires (NCSA, 2016). In coaching, the initial recruiting letters are "just testing the waters"; meaning that the initial contact offerings are trying to gauge interest level from the potential student-athlete based on the response or lack of a response. Once the coach has developed a pool of potential student-athletes that have shown some degree of interest in the institution, the coach will begin making more detailed evaluations of the student-athlete's talents. After the coaches have gone through preliminary evaluations and assigned a grade for the potential student-athletes based on athletic ability, potential, intellect, program fit, and academic performance, the coach will begin pursuing the athlete with calls, emails, in home visits, athletic event visits, and more personal evaluation (Pauline, 2010). During this portion of the recruitment cycle, vast majorities of the recruiting tactics that will be studied in this research are utilized and continue into the perspective student athlete's senior year of high school.

**Recruiting Cycle for Student-Athletes.** Depending on the talent level of the student-athlete, institutions may begin early recruitment efforts as soon as the commencing of the potential student-athlete’s sophomore year in high school. During this early stage, the potential student athlete is forming a list of institutions they might be considering (Hossler, 1999). During the first semester of their junior year in high school the potential student-athlete will begin to narrow the
list of institutions based on academic performance and characteristics they find most desirable (Hossler, 1999). At the start of the second semester of the potential student-athlete's junior year of high school, the student begins to make campus visits and take standardized SAT or ACT tests (Hossler, 1999). The standardized tests create limitations for which institutions are available for student-athletes; some institutions are immediately eliminated from contention based on a lower score on the standardized tests (Johnson, 2014). Thus, narrowing of potential institutions has increased. By the potential student-athlete’s senior year, they have narrowed their college search to a limited number of institutions. Based on a combination of the student-athlete’s wants/needs and the recruiting tactics utilized by the coach or recruiter, the student will make a decision on what institution to attend (Hossler, 1999). With the recruiting cycle established, an outlook at the recruiting tactics can now be presented.

While there is a recruitment cycle that is common in the recruiting process, it is necessary to briefly discuss the recruiting loopholes that are available. These recruiting loopholes allow a coach contact with athletes before the end of their sophomore year in high school. These loopholes involve contact through a high school coach or club coach, potential student-athletes making unofficial visits and talking to the coach on campus, recruits attending camps on campus and talking with coach, and the potential student-athlete initiating the contact with a coach by calling or emailing (Frank, 2016). All these loopholes allow for early contact, which can result in a lengthier recruiting cycle or an early commitment.

**Research Problem**

The goal of this research is to examine the recruitment of potential student-athletes by examining a successful NCAA Division III cross country program in order to determine the most
consistently effective recruitment strategies utilized. The primary facet of the recruitment process being examined in this research is the identification of the recruiting tactics (persuasive strategies) and transmission of these tactics. Furthermore, the perception of effective recruiting tactics by the coach will be compared to the perception of the effectiveness of these recruiting tactics by the student-athletes. This research relies on the assumption that the persuasive sending/framing and receiving of signals between the coaches and potential student-athletes are the most significant factors in successfully recruiting quality student-athletes to Division III cross country programs. This assumption is in place because the absence of scholarship funding due to athletic ability does not play a factor in the recruitment process for Division III. While NAIA, NCAA Division II, and Division I institutions all have access to athletic scholarship funding; potentially making the recruitment process in these divisions a “bidding” war instead of a recruiting battle relying on strategic and well utilized recruiting tactics. Thus, the recruiting process for these Division III student-athletes becomes a much different process than the larger divisions. Division III recruiting is a process of minimizing the information gap between the parties involved. Furthermore, the process becomes the utilization of persuasive strategies by the coach while the potential student-athlete is deciphering and responding to these strategies and possibly creating the foundation for the next persuasive strategy. While this exchange can and does happen in Division I and II institutions, the added variable of financial assets for athletic ability can diminish the recruiting process in terms of minimizing information asymmetry and persuasive tactics.

It is imperative to the success of a college cross country program to be able to successfully and consistently recruit quality student-athletes to one's institution. Thus, continually striving to identify and utilize more effective recruiting tactics enables coaches to have a better opportunity
to succeed. Successful programs will be qualified in terms of their continuous presence in the national rankings during the years 2005-2015, as a top 25 National Division III program. The program identified for this case study has spent a considerable amount of time in the top 25 during this time span (USTFCCC, 2015).

**College Recruiting Tactics**

The identification of college recruiting tactics has a large body of research behind it. Beginning with social characteristics and developing into individual tactics. The two social effectiveness characteristics that are identified as being absolute in college recruiting are political skills and social skills (Magnusen, Kim, Perrewe, & Ferris, 2014). Political skills refer to the ability to effectively understand others in the work environment and to utilize such knowledge to influence others to act in a particular way that enhances one’s personal or organizational objectives. Politically skilled individuals can adjust their behavior in influential ways, which appear to be both genuine, and sincere (Magnusen, Kim, & Perrewe, 2014). While social skills refer to the ability of an individual to effectively, communicate with others. With those two broad skills established, an examination of influence strategies and tactics can be done. Influence strategies refer to the categorization, identification, and packaging of information by recruiters that are likely to showcase a significant impact on the potential recruit (Magnusen et al., 2014). Furthermore, influence tactics describe the mode of information transmission utilized by the recruiters.

Effective recruiters demonstrate an ability to identify and pursue athletes, but they are also able to properly select and calibrate influence strategies and tactics according to their recruitment circumstance, competitive levels, and recruiting targets. Thus, while some tactics
may change based on the individual characteristics of the potential student-athlete, other tactics could be a sound choice to utilize in that recruiting situation (Magnusen et al., 2014). Effective recruiting is the ability of the recruiter to frame and transmit their tactic in a way that best resonates with each potential student-athlete.

Recruiting influences can be broken down into three basic categories. The categories are academic factors, athletic factors, and external factors. Academic factors include majors offered, academic reputation, post-graduate career opportunities, and faculty/staff. Athletic factors include coach/staff characteristics, sports facilities, program history, the level of competition, and competition atmosphere. External factors include economic conditions, school location, weather/climate conditions, campus life, and institution infrastructure (Magnusen et al., 2014). The potential student-athletes will have pre-decided factors that are most important to them (Klenosky, Templin, & Troutman, 2001).

With the influences broken down into three basic groups, an examination of proactive influence tactics can be displayed. These proactive influence tactics are **rational**, **exchange**, **appeal**, **legitimating**, **apprising**, **pressure**, **collaboration**, **ingratiation**, **consultation**, **personal appeal and coalition** (Magnusen et al., 2014). **Rational** persuasion is a common tactic that utilizes real-world evidence. For example, “this program makes a lot of sense. You will see significant playing time as a freshman and our institution offers the academic major and minor you want”. Another influential tactic is the **exchange**, which offers an interexchange in the present or future by the recruiters to the potential student-athletes. For example, “I do not have an opening on the roster this year, but next year you will be a varsity contributor.” **Appeal** is a common recruiting tactic. Appeal plays on the student-athletes’ dreams, ideals and values. The purpose for this tactic is to create a space of emotional arousal for the potential student-athlete
(Magnusen et al., 2014). **Legitimating** can be a powerful recruiting tactic. Legitimating has the recruiter making it aware to the potential student athletes that they have the authority and will to make good on the offers they are presenting. **Apprising** is the act of explaining how their offers will personally benefit the potential student-athlete and further enhance their career ambition. **Pressure** is a tactic that has the recruiters engaging in persistency of reminders and contact with the potential student-athlete. Furthermore, an ultimatum can be placed on the potential student-athlete. For example, "sign with my institution now, otherwise I cannot guarantee a spot will be open this fall when you arrive on campus" (Magnusen et al., 2014). **Collaboration** is a tactic that utilizes the recruiter’s willingness to provide the potential student-athletes with support, such as tutoring services and team support. **Ingratiation** has the recruiter providing admiration and flattery for the potential student-athlete. Normally, this involves the recruiter using many compliments about the potential student athlete’s athletic skill or athletic wisdom (Magnusen et al., 2014). **Consultation** refers to the recruiter seeking out advice from the student-athletes to help develop a plan to improve an activity where the student-athletes support is desired. For the most part, this tactic is used when recruiters ask the potential student-athlete what they can do to help the recruiter’s team achieve a goal. **Personal appeal** is done when recruiters knowingly show an indebtedness to the student-athlete. For example, “We have known each other a long time, but you are an adult now and I need your help. I want you to play here so we can achieve our team goals”. The last tactic is **coalition**, which has the recruiter enlisting the help of others, such as an influential agent. For example, “Your entire family has played for this institution” (Magnusen et al., 2014).

These proactive tactics vary greatly, but these tactics can become favored tactics for a coach. Furthermore, these tactics become the “backbone” of recruiting strategies and the decision
by the coach on which strategies to deploy can “make or break” the recruitment process for a particular potential student-athlete. Depending on individual characteristics of the potential student-athlete and the ability of the coach to deliver, the tactic will vary the effectiveness of the tactic in the situation.

Earlier studies examining student-athlete recruiting provided mixed conclusions regarding college choice. Stotlar (1976) surveyed Division I college football players from Pennsylvania State University. The study found that players were most influenced by the opportunity to play, coaching staff, and the athletic program as a whole (Stoler, 1976). Thus, all the factors were directly related to athletics and football reinforcing the “dumb jock” stereotype. In contrast, Swaim (1983) surveyed basketball players from both NCAA and NAIA institutions. The student-athletes were asked to rate 10 items as most significant and 10 items as least significant. This study’s sample had all three NCAA Divisions and the NAIA. His results revealed these recruiting tactics as being effective: career opportunities after graduation, academic reputation, availability of the desired program of study, and coaching staff. This study showed more favor to academics as a major recruiting tactic compared to the other (Swaim, 1983). Unfortunately, this study utilizes all divisions, which as mentioned above, have drastic differences in the recruitment process between themselves. While both of these studies examined student-athletes based on the division they competed in. Mathes and Gurney (1985) split up their sample into revenue sports (Football and Basketball) vs. non-revenue sports instead of divisions. They utilized a 59-item student-athlete recruitment decision-making survey. Their study showed that revenue sports’ student-athletes ranked coach, academic, campus, and athletic factors significantly higher than non-revenue sports participants (Mathes & Gurney, 1985).

Gabert, Hale, and Montalvo (1999) studied first-time freshman student-athletes from
NCAA Division I, II, and NAIA. The results highlighted that the head coach was one of the most influential factors throughout the three categories. Besides head coach, the factors were different within each division. NCAA Division I student-athletes identified "academic support services" as the most important factor, NCAA Division II students-athletes believed "school location" as the most influential factor, and NAIA-level student-athletes cited "head coach" as the most influential (Gabert et al., 1999). Furthermore, this study suggests that contemporary student-athletes make college choices with reasonable consideration for athletic and non-athletic factors.

Even with consideration for both athletic and non-athletic factors within recruiting, a differentiation can be seen between the divisions. Division I student-athletes are influenced more by athletic environment than social or academic college factors. On the other hand, Division II and NAIA student-athletes place a much greater value on non-athletic factors (Gabert et al., 1999). This study did not look into Division III student-athletes, but a separation between Divisions I and other divisions is starting to become apparent.

Goss, Jubenville, and Orejan (2006) studied 229 freshman student-athletes from Division III and NAIA institutions and split them into revenue (basketball, football) vs. non-revenue sports. Cross country is considered a non-revenue sport; thus, this study shows results for a division III non-revenue perspective. The results highlighted that "degree program" was the biggest factor for non-revenue student-athletes (both male and female). In addition, the opportunity to play, head coach, athletic facilities and academic support service were significant factors for both men and women non-revenue student-athletes. For revenue sports student-athletes, the factors were largely the same for men and women, although men thought "head coach" was the most influential. "Degree program" was a significant factor for the sampled population (Goss et al., 2006). Overall, this study displayed that athletic, academic and campus-
related tactics all are effective and personnel could best recruit potential student-athletes with a combination of the three.

Most studies focused on what division the student-athlete was in or whether the student-athlete competed in revenue vs. non-revenue sports, there is a collective effort to narrow the population even further. This narrowing is completed by each individual sport. Pauline (2010) explored the recruiting tactics involved with recruiting lacrosse student-athletes to one’s institution. The study utilized an influential tactic survey to collect data. The results highlighted that academic factors were the most influential factor for both males and females in Division II and Division III. In contrast, Division I lacrosse players sighted athletic factors and coaching staff as the most influential factors (Pauline, 2010). In addition, Pauline, Pauline & Allen (2013) studied factors influencing college softball players from all divisions. Once more, Pauline used the influential tactic survey to collect data. The results showed that coach’s personality/style, academic facilities, the opportunity to play early in career, and graduation rate of athletes as being the most influential tactics. Boldin, Stahura, & Greenwood (2004) studied the influential recruiting tactics for baseball and found that early playing time was the most influential factor for baseball players (Boldin et al., 2004). A trend continues to be apparent. Division I potential student-athletes tend to be influenced more by recruitment tactics that revolve around athletics more so than Division II and Division III athletes do. Furthermore, revenue sports student-athletes are even more influenced by athletic tactics than other Division I athletes. Division II and III potential student-athletes are more influenced by academic recruiting tactics, in particular, messages referring to one's major/interest of study.

Magnusen (2011) used another approach when he focused on the qualities and characteristics of the recruiter instead of the individual tactics utilized. His study was done on
Division I women’s soccer coaches. Every Division I women’s soccer coach was sent a survey and 131 responded to the survey. A multiple regression analysis was used and determined that political skill, agreeableness, neuroticism, behavioral integrity, career record and NCAA rank had a significant impact on recruiting effectiveness. This study took a unique view on the recruiting process and focuses on the creator of the recruiting tactics (Magnusen, 2011).

The body of work done on college recruiting has been studied via quantitative analysis mainly using mean scores to verify conclusions. Qualitative research is lacking in the overall body of work. Furthermore, the body of work relies on just displaying what broad factor influenced the student-athletes, but more importantly does not feature what type of transmissions or proactive recruiting strategies were used in recruiting these student-athletes. This study strives to provide a qualitative outlook on not only the most effective broad recruiting tactics but also the transmissions and proactive recruiting strategies for NCAA Division III college recruiting. To analyze this subject matter, a theoretical framework is needed. The framework used for this study is a combination of signaling theory and framing theory.

Introduction to Signaling Theory

Signaling theory follows a four-step timeline consisting of signaler, signal, receiver, and feedback. This theory attempts to capture the process of sending out signals to convey information about unobservable qualities of the sender, in order to minimize the information asymmetry or to accumulate symbolic capital that is found in the situation (Preuss & Alfs, 2008, p.56). Signaling theory is used to describe behavior between two parties who have access to different information. Signaling theory discusses the communication decisions made by the “signaler” in order for the “receiver” to interpret the message and assess the desirability of the
“signaler”. Signaling theory has been utilized in human resource management, marketing, and organizational concepts. Recently, signaling theory has been utilized in communication studies, such as gang recruiting. In summary, signaling theory has been applied to an abundance of business aspects, but is still lacking its utilization in the communication field. With that in mind, the potential role of effective signaling could be significant to different areas of research within the communication field.

This study’s goal is to identify the recruiting tactics that resonate best with Division III potential students-athletes. Signaling theory will highlight which “signals” best minimize the information asymmetry between the institutions and the potential students. The information asymmetry is a vital catalyst in recruiting students-athletes. The potential student-athlete’s selection is an agency problem of asymmetric symmetry. To clarify, a student-athlete has more information about his or her own abilities than the potential institutions, while institutions have more information about the quality of their own product than the potential student-athletes do. Furthermore, students-athletes know more about their athletic characteristics and behavioral intentions than does the institution, and the institution knows far more about its wants and needs than does the student-athlete. By this logic, individuals do not stumble into institutions by chance, rather selection becomes a reciprocal exchange; student-athletes select institutions, but institutions also select students-athletes (Pyrooz & Densley, 2015). In addition, in order for potential student-athletes to gain recognition and be a highly recruited commodity, high-quality potential student-athletes need to outperform their fellow potential student-athletes. In turn, this creates a competitive recruiting environment not only for the coaches competing against other coaches in “recruiting battles” but for potential student-athletes attempting to gain the attention from the best institutions. For the purpose of this study, we will be focusing more on the process
of how institutions select and recruit student-athletes to their institution.

Another common example of information asymmetry within college recruiting is the information regarding the team. For example, the coach will know the composition of their team much better than the potential student-athlete will. From how talented their team currently is, the development of athletes during the off-season, the other potential student-athletes being recruited are all different facets of the team, which the coach will know in detail than the potential student-athlete. In contrast, the student-athlete will know how many institutions are recruiting them and the recruiting messages by other institutions. Thus, this is an example along with many others were limiting the information asymmetry would bring the parties closer together and positively influence the possibility of potential student-athlete attending the institution. This study is going to highlight which recruiting tactics/strategies best minimize information asymmetry, resulting in recruiting more quality students-athletes.

Signaling theory offers unique clarity unlike common communication models. This framework is incredibly useful when describing behavior when two parties have access to different information (student-athlete vs. institution). In every case of the college, recruiting process there is an information gap between the coach and the potential student-athlete. With the established information asymmetry between the coach and potential student-athlete, a process of limiting that information asymmetry occurs between the coach and potential student-athlete to attempt to come to a reciprocal exchange (committing to compete for an institution). This notion intensifies because a low-quality recruit can threaten the reputation of an institution, and not all the resources utilized to recruit the low-quality recruit are returned. Signaling theory provides an effective framework for analyzing the communication cycle that takes place during this recruitment process.
Signaling Theory

The creator of signaling theory, Michael Spence said, “signals are not terribly complicated in games where the parties involved have the same incentives, where there is commonly understood desire to communicate accurate information to each other” (2002). In other words, when a party’s only desire in the exchange is to communicate accurate information and no alternative incentives are in play, signaling becomes a predictable endeavor (Spence, 2002). On the other hand, signaling normally features alternative incentives besides just signaling accurate information. The way these alternative incentives become the reality for the signaler is through taking advantage of the information gaps between the parties involved. These informational gaps change some of the performance characteristics that can occur in an exchange (Spence, 2002). Furthermore, these informational gaps bring information asymmetry to the exchange.

Information asymmetry describes the difference in knowledge bases between the parties involved in the exchange. Simply put, information asymmetry occurs when one party knows information the other party does not (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, Reutzel, 2011). Furthermore, there are two broad types of information where asymmetry is particularly important: information about quality and information about intent (Stiglitz, 2000). The first type is when one party is not fully aware of the characteristics of another party. The second type of information is when one party is concerned about the other party’s behavior or behavioral intentions (Elitzur & Gavious, 2003). Signaling theory can be applied in many different situations (Connelly, et.al, 2011). The great insight this theory delivers lies within identifying the processes that resolve information asymmetries in many different circumstances (Connelly, et.al, 2011).

The signaling timeline includes four primary aspects: the signaler, the signal, the receiver,
and feedback (note the signaling timeline display on p.24). For this study, the signaler primarily refers to the coach or recruiter, the receiver primarily refers to the potential student-athlete, and the signal refers to the recruiting tactic being utilized by the coach or recruiter. Of course, not every aspect can be pinpointed so easily, some instances may include multiple signalers, receivers and signals (Connelly, et. al, 2011). Furthermore, the potential student-athlete in some circumstances can become the signaler and the coach or recruiter can become the receiver. For example, a receiver could be barraged with multiple, even competing signals, sent by different entities within a country. To elaborate, a potential student-athlete is searching for a possible destination to attend college and compete in their sport(s). The student is going to be bombarded by competing signals from different schools all over the nation or region. All these signals are coming from the same geographic area, but they are all different entities signaling different signals (recruiting tactic or message) to the receiver. This situation can even be broken down further, where an individual school could be sending multiple signals to a receiver. For this portion of the study, we will look more closely into each of the different aspects of signaling theory (signaler, receiver, signal, and feedback).

![Signaling Timeline](image-url)

**Figure 1 Signaling Timeline**

Note: $t =$ time

**Signaler.** The signalers are insiders who obtain information about individuals and organizations that are not available to outsiders (Spence, 1973). These signalers carry an advantage in knowledge base over the receivers. With that being said, an information gap is present between the two parties involved. On a broad level, a signaler can possess both positive and negative information that an outsider could potentially find useful. For example, an institution traditionally has a competitive cross-country program but also features good performing arts and communication programs. The institution in this example has accurate information about its potential offerings. The institution as a signaler has the clear advantage on a knowledge basis about its areas of study than does a potential student searching for possible places to attend college and participate in sports.

Notably, signalers and receivers can have competing interests. Furthermore, this can lead to the signaler “cheating” by intentionally producing false signals, just so the receiver will be “moved” by the signal (Johnstone & Grafen, 1993). The presence of false signalers can be located in many different areas of life. Over time, different entities can develop a reputation for dishonesty. Those entities in question are behaving unethically sending false signals.

The antidote to false signalers is signal honesty (Durcikova & Gray, 2009). Signal honesty refutes what false signalers do; instead, signal honesty is defined as the signaler has the underlying quality associated with the signaler. For example, signal honesty would be demonstrated when a coach signals to a potential student-athlete that there is a possibility of being a varsity runner as a “true freshman,” when there is truly that potential. While a coach producing false signals would signal to the potential student-athlete that there is a chance for a varsity spot, but in reality, the roster has many quality varsity runners on it, thus no varsity spot is available. In the context of college recruiting, a key aspect of discovering the signal honesty of
the coach is through the current athletes on the roster and former athletes of the coach. Those individuals are the best source for coming to conclusions about the signal honesty of a coach. That is why it is common for current athletes on the roster to aid in the recruiting visits done by potential student-athletes. In fact, current athletes and former athletes become the primary advocates for the signal honesty of the coach. A key component in the usefulness of a signal to a receiver depends on a combination of the extent to which the signal corresponds with the sought-after quality of the signaler, and the extent of deception used by the signaler (Connelly, et.al, 2011).

Signal. Signaling theory focuses primarily on the deliberate communication of positive information in an effort to convey a positive signal. The signaler can possess both positive and negative information. From there, the signaler decides what information they would like to communicate with. To elaborate, the signal is completely created by the signaler. The signaler can choose which information to include/do not include in the signal. In turn, this gives great power in the situation to the signaler.

Signaling theory focuses on the actions taken by the signaler to communicate the signal in an effective way to the receiver. Signalers could potentially overwhelm receivers with observable actions, but not all actions are useful signals. This leads into signal observability, which is the extent receivers notice the signal (Connelly, et.al, 2011). Observability is an important characteristic, but is not the only one. The second important characteristic is signal cost. Signal cost is a number of resources necessary to produce the signal by the signaler. For example, if the signaler does not have any underlying quality associated with the signal, but believes the benefits of the signal will outweigh the costs, the signaler may still attempt to move forward with the signal (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012). The notions of observability and cost are
vitaly important for college recruiting purposes. Colleges have strict budgets for recruiting students. With this in mind, colleges are forced to be as effective as possible on being observable and cost efficient.

Another important aspect of signals is signal fit. Signal fit refers to the ability of the signal to represent the characteristics of the signaler (Connelly, et.al, 2011). To clarify, a signal from an institution in Wisconsin about sports should not include descriptions of a campus life along the ocean. It is true that the institution could potentially be located along a large body of water, but in turn, they do not have access to an oceanfront. Simply, this signal does not fit the signaler.

Signal frequency is another important aspect of signals. Signal frequency refers to the number of times a particular signal is sent. Signaling frequency is used to great amounts because entities want to reduce the knowledge gap between themselves and their receivers. In Division III recruiting, there is an unlimited amount of contact between the coach and potential student-athlete. This notion gives coaches the opportunity to extend more contact to recruits and potentially minimize the information asymmetry between the parties involved better than the other divisions. This technique is used because entities want to create a feeling of openness between themselves and their receivers (Janney & Folta, 2003). Furthermore, signalers are attempting to create a positive relationship with a receiver. Thus, the increase in a number of signals provides an opportunity to achieve that objective.

Receiver. The third aspect of signaling theory is the receiver. The receivers are outsiders who lack information about the entity, but would like to receive this information. For signaling to take place, the signaler should benefit from an action by the receiver that would not have been
done without the signal. Most of the time, this involves selection of the signaler in favor of other alternatives (Connelly, et.al, 2011). A key facet is that the outsider gains from making decisions based on information obtained from the signal.

The effect of a signal is determined in part by the characteristics of the receiver. In other words, some signals will resonate better with receivers than other ones based on their individual aspects. Comparably, the signaling process will not work if the receiver is not looking for a signal or does not know what to look for. Thus, the extent to which receivers scan the environment for signals plays a major role in the signaling process (Connelly, et.al, 2011). Another important aspect of the signaling process is the ability of the receiver to translate the signal into the perceived meaning the signalers intend. This notion is vital for the success of the signal. If the receiver perceives the signal incorrectly, there is a possibility for a negative review of the signaler from the receiver. Finally, receivers may apply different levels of importance to signals, thus causing the signal to be distorted in turn; the meaning could be altered from the original intent of the signaler (Ehrhart & Zieger, 2005).

**Feedback.** It is important for receivers to send information back to signalers about the effectiveness of their signal. Countersignals occur when receivers send feedback about ways to signal more effectively. A major assumption is that both the receivers and the signaler desire information. The receivers desire the signal from the signalers. On the other hand, the signaler desires feedback from the receiver about how to improve their signal. Receivers’ feedback is important because it can provide insight into which signals are reliable, which signals capture attention, and how the signals are being interpreted. Overall, to improve signaling, both the signaler and receiver are needed to complete the timeline (Connelly, et.al, 2011).
Signaling Environment. Signaling environment is a major catalyst in the effects of the signaling theory process. Influences from the environment can cause signals to be more or less observable. In situations where the area is noisy (refers to situations where their signal becomes difficult to articulate), the chances are the signal will be less accurate than the signaler’s desire. The signaling environment between signaler and receiver can affect the clarity of the signal. In turn, with unreliable signals being sent, the receivers can misinterpret what the signal is trying to portray, which can lead to bigger consequences for the signaler.

Signaling theory offers unique clarity to the process of minimizing information asymmetry between two parties who have access to different information. The recruiting process that takes place is a perfect example of two parties who have access to different information. Thus, the signaling theory provides a definitive framework to analyze the recruiting process. To enhance the analysis of the recruiting tactics framing theory will be added. Framing theory allows for a complete explanation for value matching the signal with a receiver. Furthermore, framing theory adds considerable depth to the facets of the signal making process which exists in the recruiting process, thus, allowing for more detailed explanations about individual signals being sent to create a certain response by the coach to the potential student-athlete and vice versa.

Framing Theory

Framing is an umbrella concept that can be utilized to examine a plethora of different academic fields and situations. Framing can examine the process involved with public relations. Furthermore, framing can be utilized in a rhetorical approach that focuses on how messages are created. Framing is connected to the underlying psychological processes that individuals use to
analyze information, to make judgments and create personal conclusions about the world around them (Hallahan, 1999).

Framing can sometimes be mistaken for bias in different situations. Framing significantly differs from bias in several ways. First, it is more sophisticated, and it goes beyond the simple notion of pro or con, favorable or unfavorable. Framing adds the possibilities of more complex emotional responses and adds a cognitive dimension. Second, framing recognizes the aptitude of a text or presentation to define a situation, define an issue, and to set the terms of a debate (Tankard, 2001).

In order to define framing for the context of this study, a foundation needs to be established. Framing fundamentally involves individuals constructing their personal social reality. To clarify, individuals act on their own perceptions of reality rather than the objective reality (Lippman, 1922). With the notion that individuals live within their own constructed reality, a situation presents itself where individuals or organizations become “imagemakers” and attempt to define reality for individuals. Framing is a critical activity in the construction of social reality because it helps shape the perspectives through which individuals see the world (Hallahan, 1999). Framing utilizes the following three basic concepts: inclusion, exclusion, and emphasis. Entman (1993) summarized the essence of framing processes with the following:

‘Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Frames, then define problems—determine what a causal agent is doing and costs and benefits, usually measured in terms
of cultural values; diagnose causes-identify the forces creating the problem; make moraljudgments-evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies offer andjustify treatments for the problem and predict their likely effects.’ (p.55)

Within a message, a frame limits or defines the message's meaning by shaping the extrapolations that individuals make about the message (Hallahan, 1999). Frames reveal judgments made by message creators or frames. Within framing, the three basic strategies are; semantic, valence, and story framing.

**Semantic Framing.** Semantic framing is concerned with phrasing and organization of the features of a message. They can combine a variety of codes and discourses that orient and direct the message to the participant. Semantic frames define the topic of the message, the context in which the messages proposals are to be comprehended, and the way of thinking about the message (Biocca, 2014). Overall, semantic framing is concerned with the phrasing of terms within the message to imply certain desired meaning (Hallahan, 1999). Semantic framing differs from valence framing on the basis that semantic framing reorganizes sentences so a key phrase comes to the forefront, while valence framing puts information in either a positive or negative light (Avineri & Waygood, 2013).

**Valence Framing.** Valence framing refers to putting information in either a positive or a negative light. In addition, it can be seen as using positive or negative words in the vocal or electronic delivery (Lagerwerf, Boeynaems, Van Egmond-Brussee & Burgers, 2015). Furthermore, this can be seen as putting information as either opposition or support (Bizer, Larsen, Petty, 2011). In other words, valence framing is the specific selection of positive or negative words to make particular aspects more salient (Entman, 1993). Valence framing is a
form of framing in which a stance is expressed explicitly with descriptions in either positive or negative terms (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003). It seems that negative valence attracts attention and affects decisions more than positive valence in a political context (Lagerwerf et al. 2015). More specifically, the negativity bias posits that negativity elicits more autonomous motivational responses than neutral or positive stimuli (Cacioppo, Berntson, Larsen, Poehlmann, & Ito, 2008). Negative information is regarded as more informative because it causes an adoption in behavior (Lagerwerf et al. 2015). With an overwhelming suggestion of negative stimuli being more impactful, the question is, does this notion carry the same effect in the context of college recruiting?

With the extreme pressure on a coach to recruit high-quality student-athletes, does the perception of competition for recruiting affect the way recruiting is done? Does the perception of competition for recruiting vs. actual competition in recruiting cause a coach to utilize messages with negative valence more often? The use of negative valence in the context of college recruiting is an interesting question that has not been researched in academia. Thus, this study intends on answering this question.

**Story Framing.** The most complex form of framing is storytelling. Story framing involves selecting key themes or ideas that are the focus of the message and utilizing a variety of techniques that support that theme (Hallahan, 1999). Through the expression and reconstruction of emotions within a particular narrative boundary, storytelling provides individuals with a familiarity where alternatives can be explored and different perspectives can eventually be accepted (Garcia-Lorenzo, 2010). While storytelling may be the most complex and difficult to master, it is also potentially the most effective persuasive method of framing.
Cognitive Processing. Framing operates by biasing the cognitive processing of information by individuals. There are two primary mechanisms used to explain cognitive processing. One of the mechanisms used is called contextual cues; these contextual cues guide decision-making and inferences drawn by message audiences (Hallahan, 1999). Valence framing of a decision operates as a cognitive process that guides decisions involving uncertainty or risk. Negative information is weighed more heavily than positive information and is more attention getting (Pratto & John, 1991) (Lagerwerf et al. 2015). Negative framing may prompt individuals to give greater effort to articulate a message (Kuo, Hso & Day, 2009). Thus, this suggests that message framing effects vary by the level of involvement by the participant (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990).

The second mechanism which framing operates in is priming. Priming is the concept of how exposure to one stimulus influences responses to another stimulus. Framing affects cognitive processing by selectively influencing which memory or stimulus to activate to convey a particular message. Priming effects can be both conscious and unconscious. For an example of a conscious priming effect, an individual uses a message cue to remember their street address. An unconscious priming effect would be categorizing a topic during the pre-attention phase of processing using rules accepted by the masses (Entman, 2007).

Framing concerning Signal Honesty. Framing can be viewed as manipulative and can be misleading to the receiver of the information. In order for framed signals to been perceived as credible, the signal must have a high level of signal honesty. Furthermore, if the framed signal does not hold a high level of signal honesty the signal could be unethical. The signaler performing the framing will be performing unethical practices.
Models of Framing

As mentioned earlier framing is an umbrella concept with many subsidiaries. Framing is a theoretically rich and useful concept, but suffers from a lack of a coherent definition. Depending on the circumstances in play, the meaning of framing will vary based on what is being asked of the situation. While the lack of a coherent definition may be a weakness, it can also be framing's biggest strength. Framing's emphasis on providing a context within which information is presented, allows for framing to be viable in many different situations and scenarios. There are seven distinct models for framing. These models are the following: situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility and news. For the sake of this literature review, we will only be covering models that best align with college recruiting, which are attributes and actions.

**Framing of Attributes.** The framing of attributes is used in the context of semantic framing to highlight particular attributes that are believed to be flattering to the individuals involved while other attributes believed to not be flattering are ignored or downplayed. Used in the context of the signaling theory, a signaler will create a signal that features certain attributes that will best resonate with the receiver evoking positive feedback while avoiding or downplaying other features the signaler believes will not create positive feedback. For example, a college recruiter chooses to highlight the notion that their team was conference champions while ignoring the notion that their program will be graduating all the athletes that played major roles in winning that conference championship to the recruit. In addition, framing is central to comparative advertising that examines claims made about a particular product’s attributes relative to others in the same category (Manning, Miniard, Barone, & Rose, 2001). For example, during "recruiting battles" institutions may compare their certain attributes they feel dominant into other institutions within the recruiting battle.
Institutions strive to position potential student-athletes so they will be evaluated favorably and potential student-athletes will respond in the desired way. Attribute framing involves creating either positive or negative valence associations. Positive valence associations utilize beliefs, values, traditions, and rituals that individuals prize. An example is college recruiters framing success of their institution's team to potential student-athletes because of many student-athletes value success on the field. While, negative valence associations utilize messages focused on competitors (Hallahan, 1999).

Generally, attribute framing relies on semantic differences related to making what is practically the same choice, such as describing a “higher institution acceptance rate” or a “low decline rate” (Hallahan, 1999). Attribute framing also can entail effects from alternative descriptions of the success-failure rate.

**Framing of Actions.** Framing of actions focuses on persuasive attempts to maximize cooperation from the parties involved in which no independent options are involved. For example, a coach may frame the likelihood of a varsity spot as if you commit to their institution early the potential student-athlete will have a varsity spot, but if they commit later in the recruitment process then the varsity spot will be gone. In the context of a persuasive communicator, the concern is how to frame actions necessary to attain amenability with a wanted goal (Hallahan, 1999). Overall, the framing of action is only concerned with maximizing behavioral intentions and actions by posting desired actions in the most advantageous way with no regard for giving choices to the participant.

Framing of action involves directing intentions towards one side or the other on the spectrum between positive or negative. A positive framing of action will keenly focus on
obtaining a positive consequence whereas the negative frame focuses attention on avoiding the negative consequence. Findings from the research lean towards negative consequences producing the most persuasive impact (McClure, White, & Sibley, 2009; Ganzach & Karsahi, 1995). While other findings from the research found that self-efficacy, levels were a major factor in the persuasive effects of messages. With that notion both positive and negative are equally persuasive (Block & Keller, 1995).

**Applying Signaling Theory and Framing to College Recruitment**

Direct application of these theories to college recruitment does not currently exist within the literature. Some research within the field displays similarities with the work this study is doing, which can present some interesting findings for this study. Winter (1996) utilized the “marketing theory” which has some similarities to the signaling theory in his study on college faculty recruitment. This study used quantitative surveys and highlighted that potential faculty favored career education or long-term education plans. Within this older-aged sample, stability was a positive factor. Studies that involved college student-athletes showed favor to coaches as being a big influence on their selection. Coaches that have longevity at an institution provide a sense of stability for a program. Coaches are viewed as a parental figure and this in turn creates stability within the program (Becker, 2009). This stability in the coaching staff can be an immense advantage in the recruiting process. Individuals tend to enjoy the feeling of stability (Miesler, 2007). Thus, stability is a common theme that many individuals look for within the recruitment process.

Gregory, Meade & Thompson (2013) utilized signaling theory in accordance with internet recruitment for Fortune 500 companies. The results highlighted that companies that presented the
largest quantity and accuracy of information on their website were held in higher favor by their sample. Thus, the companies that best minimized the information asymmetry between the company and the potential employee were the companies that had the most effective recruitment websites. Websites have become an important tool for institutions and businesses alike for recruiting high-quality members to your program/organization (Franetovic, 2012) (Vander Schee, 2007). Furthermore, websites are cost-efficient and easily maintainable for entities. The effectiveness of websites at limiting information asymmetry and promoting your company significantly outweigh the resources needed to produce and maintain a quality website.

Pyrooz and Densley (2015) utilized signaling theory in the context of street gang recruiting. Street gangs possess many of the same problems that legal institutions/businesses deal within the context of recruiting. The study focuses on moving past the notion of a singular signal and features a multiple signal approach. Furthermore, the gang’s ability to minimize information asymmetry between themselves and the potential gang member allowed the gang to have more accurate information about the potential gang member, giving them an easier decision of acceptance. The most important finding from this study is the reaffirmation that the recruiting process is not only what the signaler provides to the receiver, but the receiver provides to the signaler. As mentioned earlier, individuals know more about their individual characteristics and behavioral intentions than does the institution and the institution knows far more about its wants and needs than does the individual. By this logic, individuals do not stumble into institutions probabilistically, rather selection becomes a reciprocal exchange; individuals select institutions, but institutions also select individuals.

Corsino et al., (2013) utilized the framing theory in the context of recruiting young adults into weight loss trials. This group utilized six group interviews featuring 18-35-year-olds and
attempted to answer four questions. These questions were: what are some reasons people your 
age care about their weight, what are some ways people your age can control their weight, what 
would people like you participate in a weight loss study, and most importantly what could we do 
to recruit people your age into a weight loss study? Overall, the results suggested over 
emphasizing health benefits and traditional recruitment methods such as targeted mass mailing 
are very successful for this age group. This study focuses on individuals older than a vast 
majority of potential student-athletes, thus, the results might be different if the age group was a 
younger audience. Even though this study utilized a qualitative method, this studied failed to 
identify the key facets for how to frame to this age group. Instead, this study focused on what to 
frame and what media outlet to use for recruiting. While this particular study differs from the 
current study it does highlight the framing theory being explored in a qualitative manner with 
group interviews displaying some potential responses.

While these studies did not match all the aspects of this particular study, each of them 
presented certain aspects that can be used to create a foundation for this study. Furthermore, 
these studies all create great arguments for different aspects of recruiting, framing theory, and 
signaling theory.

Research Questions

RQ 1: Which recruiting tactics/strategies did Division III student-athletes feel were the most 
effective?

RQ 2: Which recruiting tactics/strategies did Division III coaches/recruiters feel were the most 
effective?

RQ 3: Does the perception of competition for recruiting vs. actual competition in recruiting
cause a coach to utilize messages with negative valence more often?

RQ 4: In regards to recruiting, is signal frequency more vital to successful recruiting or is the substance of the signal?

Summary

The combination of the signaling theory and framing theory (in a public relation, constructionist context), provide a unique and complementary lens for examining the Division III recruiting process. Signaling theory brings clarity to the process of minimizing information asymmetry between two parties that have access to different information. The recruiting process always features to some degree a scenario where parties will have access to different information. Thus, the utilization of signaling theory is an effective model for studying the recruitment process. Furthermore, the addition of framing theory allows for analysis of considerable depth to the facets of the signal making process which exists in the recruiting process. Thus, allowing for more detailed explanations about individual signals being sent to create a certain response by the coach to the potential student-athlete and vice versa. Thus, these theories are appropriate guides to the research and will help answer the research questions.
Chapter 2: Methodology

After understanding recruiting in the context of college athletics as well as a framework involving the signaling theory and framing theory, a foundation has been created to explore college recruiting tactics. Thus, the next logical step is to analyze the college recruiting process. For this case study, a NCAA Division III cross-country program in the upper Midwest of the United States of America was used.

A qualitative method was employed to study both cross-country student-athletes and coaches/recruiters at the case study institution. The researcher conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with cross country student-athletes and cross country coaches/recruiters from the case study institution. Appendices A and B detail questions the interviewer used to gather this study’s relevant data.

Gabert, Hale, and Montalvo (1999), in their study of college recruiting tactics, utilized a closed-question survey to gather data on the most effective recruiting tactics by taking the mean score of predetermined recruiting tactics. Their sample size was 246 freshman student-athletes. From this data, they were able to create a list of the most effective recruiting tactics and divide it by gender. Their results displayed academic support services, school location, and head coach as being the most influential for their divisions. Goss, Jubenville, and Orejan (2006) also studied the recruiting process by using a closed-question survey to create a list of the most effective recruiting tactics then utilize the mean score to determine the most effective out of their predetermined list. Their sample was 229 freshman student-athletes from six institutions. These studies were compared and showcased fairly similar results in their findings with degree programs (4.15), Opportunity to play (4.02), head coach (3.90) and academic support service
(3.68) being this studies top four factors. Both of these foundation studies in the field utilized quantitative surveys to gather their data. Then came to their conclusions utilizing mean scores. The results are a great foundation for college recruiting tactics, but the results are quantitative, thus linear and lacking depth. Furthermore, these studies failed to identify the transmission and proactive recruiting strategies involved in the recruitment process. Instead, they focused on broadly categorized tactics, which are not a complete representation of all the facets that go into a particular tactic. This study plans to expand on the previous research with a qualitative study to develop a more in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of recruiting tactics on potential student-athletes.

Interviews are a vital method of gathering data for this research project, and as Mack et al. (2005) proclaims, "The in-depth interview is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic” (p. 29). This research demanded interviews in order to explore the unique and individualistic aspect of the recruiting process for potential student-athletes. In-depth interviews allowed recollection to take place about the transmission and the proactive strategies that were used during the recruitment process. Furthermore, interviews allowed the interviewer to control the development and direction of the conversation in order to cultivate meaningful data. Interviewing both the student-athletes and the coaches/recruiters provided multiple perspectives on the recruiting process for a more in-depth analysis.

Interviews were a necessary and suitable method to gather data for this research because the college recruiting field has ample research on quantitative studies; therefore, the college recruiting field of study is missing a significant qualitative perspective on the recruiting process. Furthermore, individual interpretation and reporting of specific experiences are immensely
beneficial to the exploration of the college recruiting process. Mack et al. (2005) states, in-depth interviews are an appropriate method to "gain insight into how people interpret and order the world" (p. 30).

The interviews range in duration from 15-35 minutes. The researcher believes these interviews yielded quality results creating an effective pool of data to analyze.

Interviews were set up first through initial contact and approval from the cross country coaching staff of the case study institution. By creating this relationship early on in the process, an encouraging atmosphere from the coaching staff resulted in more cross-country runners participating.

There are 65 athletes and 2 coaches participating in the cross-country program that was studied. This study had nine student-athlete participants and two coach participants from the case study institution. Interviews were held at various public locations at the convenience of the participant. Interviews were audio recorded. After review and transcription, the audio recordings were erased to protect participant identity and potentially confidential information that was discussed during the interview.

All interviewed participants were given designated subject numbers and pseudonyms in order to protect their identity during the research. All information that could identify when the participants meet with the researcher such as: location, date, and time were eliminated from transcripts and results.

**Setting and Participants**

For the purpose of this case study, interviews were conducted on 11 participants that are
currently involved with a cross-country program in the upper Midwest of the United States of America. Of these 11 participants, two were coaches/recruiters while the remaining were current student-athletes from the case study institution. This program is appropriate for studying college recruiting because of the immense success this program has exhibited in Division III cross-country. Furthermore, this program is active in the recruiting process and brings in quality student-athletes on a yearly basis. Thus, this program has displayed its ability to recruit effectively and will present a great case study into recruiting at the Division III level.

The student-athletes participating in the case study ranged from the first-year freshman through 5th-year seniors. The variation in duration involvement with the program highlighted different perspectives creating a complete picture of the recruiting process at the case study institution. The coaching staff of the case study program participated in giving their own experiences and perspectives of the recruiting process.

The choice of this site and participation selection was based on convenience. Yet, even with a convenient sample, this study will satisfy the three basic criteria of a study designated by Ferber (1977) from an analytical point of view. The three basic criteria are: the relevance of the sample needs to be firmly established, the sample size must be adequate for analytical purposes, and subjects are a representation of the population being studied.

The relevance of the sample was firmly established in this study because the study is inquiring student-athletes about the recruiting process that took place that eventually was an influence in their college selection process. Furthermore, the study inquired coaches/recruiters about the recruiting process they implement to pursue potential student-athletes to attend their institution. Thus, both key entities of the recruiting process were represented allowing for a
comparison of the entities’ perspectives about the most effective recruiting tactics.

The sample size was adequate for the qualitative case study because it features multiple coaches and current student-athletes to enable a clear understanding of the recruiting process utilized at the case study institution. In addition, the case study institution is a constant top 25 finisher in the USTFCCC (U.S. Track & Field and Cross Country Coaches Association) rankings. Thus, this demonstrates the success this program has consistently achieved. As mentioned above, success in cross-country is largely based on one’s ability to recruit student-athletes. Thus, the case study institution is a prime example for demonstrating effective recruiting tactics and transmission of those tactics. Furthermore, this case study revealed a unique understanding of the recruiting process from a NCAA Division III institution that can be adapted to the larger body of work.

Analysis and Validation

The ongoing and inductive analysis served to identify emergent themes, patterns, and questions. The purpose of the ongoing and inductive analysis was to permit the researcher to explore and discover themes and patterns for the data and apply them to the final analysis. The researcher transcribed all interviews. The goal of the research was for emergent themes and patterns to present themselves within the transcription that can be used to answer the research questions.

All transcripts from interviews were read and analyzed to discover the reoccurring themes that emerged from the interviewees about the recruiting tactics utilized in the recruiting process. After transcriptions were complete, a first reading was done for overall understanding. The second reading was a critical analysis of the material with a focus on recurring themes,
categorization, and coding of important information. The third reading was an expression of the recurring themes within the signaling theory and framing theory framework established for this study with an emphasis on answering the research questions.

The research was transparent with findings, allowing participants to request transcripts for validation, clarity, and accuracy. The reason for transparency was to guarantee the narratives told by the coaches and student-athletes are indeed accurate and give a clear representation of the recruiting process that they were attempting to describe.

**Ethical Questions**

Participation was voluntary for this study. Participants were given informed consent approved by the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Institutional Review Board (IRB). Furthermore, all questions asked were IRB approved. Protection of the participant's identity and confidentiality was performed.

Data collection notes were stored in a locked shelf at the researcher’s residence. The audio data was erased upon transcription, while the digital data was stored on password-encrypted files on the researcher’s personal laptop. The researcher is the only person with access to the data. Participants were offered the right to review transcripts for accuracy. Information is given during the interviews that could possible release the identity of the participants was not included in the transcripts. Each participant was given a number and pseudonyms in the transcripts.

**Summary**

The goal of this study was not to replicate previous works within the field of college recruitment. Instead, this research intended on expanding the foundation that was created by the
previous works in the field. The expansion comes in the form of narrative responses from interviews that seek to dive deeper into the recruitment process than simple quantitative surveys and broad categorization of recruiting tactics.

This study aimed to explore and clarify the recruitment process through a lens of signaling and framing theory as a way to explain the recruiting tactics that proved to be the most effective within the recruiting process. In addition, an objective was to analyze the recruiting process and to understand why these tactics seem to provide the best results. This information may be useful to college coaches/recruiters to improve their recruiting effectiveness in the recruiting process.
Chapter 3: Results

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Recruiting is the lifeline for every program in the country. Recruiting is complex and is varied based on budget constraints and specific tactics being executed by the institution. The case study institution highlighted definitive strategies within their recruiting process for student-athletes. In addition, each student-athlete contributed different variables, which, in turn, created definitively altered recruiting processes. While exploring the recruiting processes of the case study institution, several important factors emerged.

The geographic location towards the case study institution was a factor that altered certain aspects of the recruiting process. Especially, student-athletes that were recruited out of high schools located within a 40-minute radius of the case study institution showed recruiting timelines that started earlier and presented opportunities for significantly more face-to-face communication between the student-athletes and coaches. This was due in part to the case study institution in particular hosting multiple athletic events throughout the year featuring local high-school student-athletes. Two of the nine participants interviewed were local recruits and their recruiting processes were drastically different from the other participants due to the reasons listed above.
The case study institution has 65 student-athletes and 4 coaches. Nine out of the 65 student-athletes (five females and four males) and two of the four coaches (one female and one male) volunteered to meet for interviews. The interview questions were designed to allow participants to share their experiences and stories, with the hope that themes and patterns would emerge regarding collegiate athletic recruiting.

With a better understanding of the recruiting process of the case study institution, the researcher discovered the recruiting tactics and strategies that best persuade student-athletes to attend an institution. When all research questions were explored, several themes emerged.

The first and most broad-reaching theme that emerged regarding recruiting tactics and strategies was the personalization of recruiting through the multiple mediums and face-to-face communication. More specifically, putting in extra time to see these student-athletes either in person or by adding additional content specific to that individual student-athlete that deviates from the traditional transmission utilized. This seemed to be important to the student-athletes because the constant bombardment of recruiting material that is sent to these student-athletes becomes overbearing and recruiting material begins to all “blend together”. This is an example of individuals choosing to ignore or occupy different signals (Connelly, et al., 2011). When the signal frequency was too high and personalization was lacking, these student-athletes choose to ignore the recruiting efforts, but when mechanisms of personalization were used, they responded. Thus, personalization became a way for the recruiter to separate themselves from other recruiters and demonstrate to the student-athlete a sincere level of caring for the student-athlete and their personal well-being.
The second theme that emerged was a level of comfort was created between the institution and the student-athlete. This was accomplished through communication with the coach and student-athlete but also, through developing relationships with fellow student-athletes on the team. This primarily took place during the campus visits or running camps during the summer. This was vital because it allowed student-athletes to get verification and opinion from someone their own age and someone who may be more relatable to the student-athlete. Furthermore, the relationship with the other student-athletes is an effective way to discover the signal honesty of the coaching staff (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012).

The third theme is that when framing recruiting pitches, the pitches are worded in a comparing context. This is done by framing favorable attributes of the institution against other institutions. Normally done using rational (real world evidence) persuasion or apprising (how offers personally benefit the student-athlete) persuasion (Magnusen et al., 2014). More specifically, the recruiting mechanism is attempting to display differences between the current institution and other institutions involved or compare recruiting strategies. This strategy attempts to make visible to the student-athletes the differences between institutions and bring down other institutions through rational persuasion. In turn, this is creating a negative implication to the other institutions. Thus, adaption behavior (not attend the other institutions) is created and both parties alike find this to be effective. In addition, this tactic is used to highlight how much more an institution wants the student-athlete or another by displaying how much extra time and effort was put into their recruiting process compared to the other.

The fourth theme is the utilization of the appeal recruiting strategy. This primarily happened on the campus visit or when communicating directly with the coach. This was done with either scheduling the recruiting visits on days with exciting things happening on campus or by planning
activities the recruits were not expecting or were different than their campus visits to other institutions. Furthermore, this tactic is most effective when paired with story framing (selecting key ideas, themes, or ideas that are the focus of messages) (Hallahan, 1999). The appeal recruiting strategy focuses on playing on the student-athletes dreams (Magnusen et al., 2014). By creating a space of emotional arousal for the student-athletes, student-athletes favored particular institutions.

The fifth and final theme was the framing tactic of always pushing “success”. This was accomplished by deviating from topics that were not a strength and focusing on topics that were a strength. In addition, valence framing (worded using positive or negative words) was used, (Lagerwerf, Boeynaems, Van-Egmond-Brussee & Burgers, 2015). Furthermore, this includes either saying we are the best or we are going to be the best, thus completely avoiding using negative terminology when describing one’s institution. The aspect of pushing success and ignoring deficiencies has shown immense success in mega sports marketing as well. This form of valence framing allows one to maximize positives and minimize negatives (Preuss & Alfs, 2011).

The study of college recruiting reveals limitations and methods that are effective. While the recruiting process is extremely complex featuring a multitude of variables, the framework of signaling theory and framing theory assisted in solidifying the most effective recruiting tactics. In addition, with the usage of both coaches and student-athletes in the participant pool the researcher was able to compare perceptions between both parties on which are the most effective recruiting strategies. Thus, the results section will include an examination of both the student-athlete perspective and the coaches’ perspective in which recruiting tactics are the most effective.
There is no such thing as a perfect “one size fits all” recruiting process or tactic, but coaches still have developed effective strategies in order to recruit a large volume of high-quality student-athletes. On the other hand, each particular student-athlete views the recruiting process differently and which actual strategy or tactic was the most effective for that particular individual could be drastically different from what the coaches perceive are the most effective. The following sections will explore the elements of the recruiting tactics that emerged from the interviews.

**Personalization**

The strategy of personalization in different mediums and communication opportunities proved to be a prevalent theme to emerge from student-athletes and coaches alike as an effective recruiting mechanism.

Seven of the nine interviewed student-athletes specifically discussed some form of personalization as an effective recruitment tactic during the process and both coaches strongly advocated for as much personalization as possible during the recruiting process.

The data collected from the interviews displays a feeling created by aspects of personalization utilized by the coaches. This aspect being “made me feel wanted/ made me feel like I would be good here”. For example, student-athlete one discussed this very feeling:

I felt like definitely made you feel really wanted here, like they kept sending letters, and they would not let you forget, and I felt like other schools, they were pretty personal but (university) just kind of made you feel like you would be good here, I don’t know, made it feel like a good fit (student-athlete one).
This passage discusses one of the monumental factors in their selection of an institution, and that was the connection and personalization of recruiting was perceived to be greater by the case study institution. Furthermore, the passage alludes to containing more substance on the messages being sent. Another example of a having substance rich messages is in this passage from student-athlete five:

I think it was when they would call me because like I could read an email full of information all the time or from like different schools, and just other schools that I applied to and just reading information was just kind of like, they looked like they had been like emails that they forwarded to everybody they were talking to. As when they would call me they were asking more how my school year was going, like how my time is, how practice is, so it seemed like they were more interested that way when they were actually calling. After races they would call or text me and say we heard you placed this and ran this time, like congratulations, or we heard you had a good race, or if I didn’t they would still congratulate me and be like there is plenty more to be ran or they were still congratulating me (student-athlete five).

This passage shows the extra effort that goes into making one’s recruiting personalized. The important aspect in this passage is that the coaches would take the time to look up race results and then send a personalized message to the student-athlete. This message is not reproduced for other student-athletes instead, it creates a sense of they want and care about me. Furthermore, the last passage mentioned text messaging as one of the primary mediums in which these personalized messages were signaled. Text messaging seems to be a good signaling environment for recruiting. The medium is less “noisy” (level of difficulty to articulate the signal) because these student-athletes are extremely versed in cell phone language and skills (Carter, 2006).
Furthermore, text messaging is a medium that student-athletes at this age are very comfortable with (Broaddus & Dickson-Gomez, 2013). This assertion is given more validation with this passage from student-athlete one.

The whole team being close and coaches caring about you, my coach still texts me once a week or twice a week, like hey are you feeling, good this week? Or how is training going? Just because even if they can’t talk to you in person, they can still make sure I am doing fine (student-athlete one).

Once more, this highlights a comfort level with the medium as well as the medium allowing for personalization in the sense that the student-athletes know that they are the only one receiving this personalized message. Coaches also found that text messaging is a great medium for personalization with recruits. This passage is from coach one.

yea definitely, I would say at first, until you get to know certain kids, it's really kind of a general and almost awkward beginning because especially with phone calls, kids don’t necessarily want to talk on the phone. But once you start to figure out something they like, and things they don’t like it’s a lot easier to talk to them or maybe don’t even call as much and just shoot them texts because that seems to be a lot more of a, they feel more comfortable doing that. So it kind of turns into what I want to talk about and then more along the way what they want to talk about, and then just making sure that they know that I care about what is going on with their athletic life, but also what they are interested in more so on a personal level (coach one).

Overall, the personalization aspect comes from an extra effort by the coaching staff and the medium through which the message is transmitted. Thus, personalization increases with high
signal substance. Within signaling theory, signals with high substance minimize information asymmetry and allow for quality feedback. In other words, it is not a big surprise that personalization of messages is one of the most effective tactics. Yet, as this next passage demonstrates not every institution puts in the significant effort, time, and resources into producing signals that have a high-level of personalization according to coach one.

I am really personable with the athletes and that’s what maybe sets us apart, instead of just sending a general text or sending out just a general email or letter, and maybe some schools don’t do that quite as much (coach one).

The ability and the resources to put in significant time to improving signal substance (personalization) is a major influence in recruiting student-athletes. In turn, according to the sample, one of the separating factors between different recruiting strategies is the level of personalization and the sample preferred recruiting mechanisms that were personalized for them.

**Create a Comfort Level**

The strategy of creating a comfort level with the student-athletes through communication outlets with the coach but primarily the current student-athletes proved to be a prevalent theme to emerge from student-athletes and coaches alike as an effective recruiting mechanism.

All nine interviewed student-athletes specifically discussed some form of increasing comfort level through communication with the coach but mainly through communication with the current student-athletes on the team. Using the current student-athletes on the team proved to be an effective recruitment tactic during the process. Furthermore, both coaches strongly advocated for potential recruits to meet and create a connection with the current student-athletes during the recruiting process.
A theme that emerged in the research is that the potential student-athletes have a good idea of what is happening in the recruiting process. They understand that in many cases coaches/recruiters are going to say what they want to hear. In turn, for many of them they wanted the things the coaches were saying reinforced by the current student-athletes on the team. In terms of signaling theory, the potential student-athletes were simply testing the signal honesty of the individual signals from the coach (Durcikova & Gray, 2009). This passage from student-athlete one demonstrates this statement effectively:

I, it was nice getting to see the team, I feel like the team really brought the my decision up a lot, because they just kind of talked like campus life and it was just nice to get an inside view of the team because the coaches can say one thing but it could be a whole different thing, talking to the athletes made it seem more trustworthy. Like someone your age more telling you how good, it is (student-athlete one).

In some circumstances, student-athletes were trying to seek more perspectives on varying factors of the college experience to increase comfort and reduce uncertainty. Thus, they would look to current student-athletes to get these different perspectives. Student-athlete five demonstrates this with this passage:

I also was getting emails from (coach) and um.. a couple of the upperclassmen as well so it felt more inviting and I was getting more information from just.. instead of one person saying this, it was more of other people and they were all from different parts of the program so I got views of every part of it, instead of just coming from like one coach (student-athlete five).

In addition, this passage from student-athlete five further explains the situation:
So I think that was what really helped persuaded me as well, is talking to actual people on the team, and then telling me their experiences. It was also like guys and girls on the team instead of just having like all girls who were in my event, they had a couple different variety so they were all giving me input (student-athlete five).

In other circumstances, student-athletes were simply seeking support when it came to navigating through the college experience, with academics, athletics, and campus life. This is shown in this passage by student-athlete seven.

I think he said that there are a lot of athletes on the team here, that if you are ever struggling in class they can help you and they are very open to helping you to succeed in class, I think I really liked that (student-athlete seven).

Moreover, student-athlete five stated this passage:

so I think it was just the positive and the constant like a reminder that I wouldn’t be the only one in it, I would have an atmosphere around me where kids are going through the exact same thing I am, so I would have a big support group (student-athlete five).

The aspect of improving comfort level was not only improved with communication with the current student-athletes but also creating a comfort level with the coaching staff. The ability of coaches to create a good comfort level was a very effective recruiting tactic. This is highlighted from student-athlete seven’s passage:

I liked how (school) recruitment process went a lot better because I met the coaches a lot personally a lot more, so I felt like more comfortable with them and just my, also my
high school track coach knew them so that made it a lot easier to um.. talk to them (student-athlete seven).

Moreover, student-athlete six demonstrated this with this passage:

um… not like any actions that they went out of their way to do, but just the way that (name) is he kind of um… he was kind of like my original high school coach, a little bit edge, you know he is not all sunshine and rainbows, and you know we are here win. So you know we got to come and run fast, and I kind of just appreciated that, so I wanted to stick with him because I knew he was game (student-athlete six).

Overall, the ability to create a level of comfort with the student-athletes proves to be an effective recruiting tactic. The student-athletes (especially the female participants) found comfort in having certain aspects reinforced with discussions with current student-athletes on the team. Student-athletes are concerned with support systems and feel stable when student-athletes come to aid in this new “journey” they are taking. Finally, student-athletes found comfort in establishing relationships with the coaching staff, especially when coaches improved signal frequency through visits/communication and word of mouth. Thus, it is not inappropriate to suggest that comfort level is improved with high signal frequency and signal honesty. In other words, when multiple parties are sending similar, honest signals a high comfort level is created between the institutions and the student-athletes. In turn, that comfort level becomes a driving force to limit information asymmetry between the parties involved in the exchange (Connelly et al., 2011).
The coaches agree strongly with the effectiveness of creating a comfortable environment as well as having current student-athletes be a major part of the recruiting process. This is demonstrated with these passages from coach one and two:

We send them off with the athletes and we hope that the athletes do a great job and entertain them (coach one).

I think, maybe the most important thing in the recruiting process is having the recruits spend time with the team (coach two).

Thus, it should go without saying both parties find extreme importance in creating a comfort level, which usually involves current student-athletes as spokespeople for the institution as well as a reliable source for knowledge to the potential recruit. This aspect needs to be a high priority for any recruitment strategy. The collaboration proactive recruiting strategy (utilizes the recruiter’s willingness to provide the potential student-athletes with support) goes hand in hand with this recruiting tactic (Magnusen et al., 2014).

**Comparison Recruiting**

The strategy of comparison recruiting through communication outlets was an effective recruiting tactic. This tactic involves framing your tactic in a way that compares your institution to other institutions the potential student-athlete is interested in attending. Most of the time this involves using rational persuasion or apprising proactive recruiting strategies. The coaches found this very effective while some student-athletes advocated for its persuasive qualities.

Five interviewed student-athletes specifically discussed some form of comparison recruiting through communication outlets while the coaches use this tactic often.
Rational Persuasion. This tactic breaks down to either framing a comparison via rational persuas ion (utilize real world evidence) or apprising (how offers will personally benefit the athlete). The rational persuasion proactive strategy attempts to dismiss other institutions with factual evidence that the potential student-athlete may not have been aware of or taken into consideration (Magnusen et al., 2014). For example, in this passage student-athlete six talks about how the coaches compared programs about how the teams were progressing um (school) and (school) more so then (school) but you know (school) obviously with the success and then a lot of their comparisons were athletically just because the success they have had with their running program, you know they have success, (school) they did a lot more academics, just because how good their (major) is here, and he did mention, you know we did pretty well last couple years and I think we are going to improve considerably in the next couple of years going forward, and he compared them to other schools in the conference (student-athlete six).

This next passage by student-athlete nine discusses rational persuasive and how the institutions from different divisions have their benefits.

um.. they talked about, um the division 1 schools talked about you know if you go division 3 you won’t have this that and the other, you know as far as facilities go which is absolutely true, um.. That was pretty much the main direction they went, and they also talked about, you know you get all the free stuff as a division 1 athlete, free shoes and things like that, um.. And then for (school) coach (name) just told me that um.. you know a school like this you will be able to run in championship races and you know we have an effect on the team, for one immediately and then over time and then run at national meets
and things like that, where a place like (school) I wouldn’t have been able to qualify for division I nationals (student-athlete nine).

As one can see, there is a high level of effectiveness when using this tactic. The ability to frame attributes related to your institution in a way that seems better to the potential student-athlete is what makes this strategy effective (Manning, Miniard, Barone, & Rose, 2001).

**Apprising Persuasion.** This style of comparison revolves framing in a way that your pitch will benefit the potential student-athlete more than the other institutions (Magnusen et al., 2014). This primary is used in an aspect of academics, the experience of the coaching staff, or athletic improvement strategy. This example from student-athlete five describes a tactic where schools are comparing academics and trying to articulate to the student-athlete that the individual institution’s recruiting package will benefit them more.

oh (school) had talked to me and I have a couple people I am running with currently in high school going and he would be kind of like (school) isn’t a great school though and they don’t have this for you, for your education. So there were a couple of times where they would tell me, like um… like… they kind of gave me a reason why I shouldn’t look into it (student-athlete five).

In other circumstances, institutions will focus on unique aspects of their athletic facilities and strategies that benefit the student-athlete. Such as this example from student-athlete nine:

They don’t like any of their routes, we were talking about that and the guys here were talking about the trails and that was a big selling point, like I said with a soft surface, being injury prone that was a pretty big selling point (student-athlete nine).
From the student-athlete’s perspective, this seems like a useful tactic, but as shown by the short passage from student-athlete six, the athletes know what these institutions are doing, but still find the information useful to have. “I mean I knew what they trying to do but it is good information to have” (student-athlete six). The athletes seem to appreciate the information as long as it is honest of the situation and has signal fit (the ability of the signal to represent the characteristics of the signaler).

**Coaches View on Comparison Recruiting.** The coaches utilize this recruiting tactic often throughout the course of the recruiting process. The coaches utilized this tactic to present noticeable difference between campuses, especially other campuses that are recruiting the same student-athlete. For example, coach one mentioned this passage:

> um.. so what we do is if we find out they are talking to another school, we kind of know that (school) doesn’t really have to recruit because a lot of kids based on the state meet. They love that track, they have good memories, so they want to compete there, but they don’t really recruit so they don’t spend the time getting to know the athletes, like we do. So we kind of ask them oh how much has the coach been in contact, and then we will kind of play up like, we are always in contact with you, don’t you want someone who wants you and kind of that level (coach one).

> They are not talking to you, you know they don’t make you feel wanted, like we do, we try to make that a really big point so they understand like, where do you want to go. Do you want to go somewhere where the coaches just sent you a letter, or somewhere where the coaches are really trying to get to know you (coach one)?
This example demonstrates this tactic effectively. In the example, we get to see an institution take advantage of an aspect of recruiting they feel they do better and use that aspect to their advantage (Hallahan, 1999). We see the institution trying to explain using rational persuasive evidence that their institution is superior to the latter. Furthermore, our sample tends to focus on rational comparison tactics in their recruiting philosophy. In this next passage by coach two, we see this tactic again:

Once you maybe know what schools they are looking at, maybe in your next conversation, you try to highlight some things that our school can offer that theirs can’t, but I wouldn’t really say the tactics change (coach two).

I mean we think (school) is a unique place, a lot of people might tell you that (school) is very similar to (school) or (school), or (school) we beg to differ and our recruiting strategy is going to point out the things that we think separate us from those other schools that people might feel are similar (coach two).

The coaches were also very adamant to maintain signal honesty and signal fit when using this tactic. Coach two reinforces this statement:

I have no, I don’t have any issues, ethically have any issues with pointing out facts, I am not going to say, well they are not a really good team, I might say well you know we finished second at conference and they finished 7th at conference, to me that is not negative recruiting, that is a fact, saying they are not really good, that is negative recruiting (coach two).

Furthermore, coach two also alluded to this constant demand to stay honest even when comparing:
Like I said, whatever happens we are always going to be honest with them. If we end up not being the right fit at least we have good credibility with it and they can’t go somewhere and say well (school) said we were going to do this but they don’t actually have that, you know that never looks good on us so whatever it is we just stay honest (coach one).

Overall, the trend that emerged was the usage of a comparative framing method mainly focusing on rational persuasion, apprising persuasion and attribute framing. According to the sample, the coaches found this tactic more effective than some of the student-athletes did. The student-athletes seemed to be aware this tactic was being used and that might account for some student-athletes not being as persuaded by this tactic.

The coaches stressed the importance of signal honesty and signal fit when not only performing this tactic but also in the recruitment process in general. There was a definitive emphasis on being honest to the student-athletes even when comparing and utilizing only facts when recruiting. In other words, avoiding “negative” recruiting.

**Appeal Proactive Recruiting Strategy**

Another theme that emerged from the research was the utilization of the appeal proactive recruiting strategy. This was accomplished by having events happening on campus during the visit or utilizing story framing throughout the recruiting process. The proactive strategy is an appeal strategy that focuses on playing to the student-athletes dreams, ideals, and value (Magnusen et al., 2014). Furthermore, a space of emotional arousal becomes created which in turn limits information asymmetry by playing on the student-athletes dreams and informing student-athletes about what they may become. The coaches framed primarily through story
framing that involves selecting key themes or ideas that are the focus of the message and utilizing a variety of techniques that support that theme (Hallahan, 1999).

Three interviewed student-athletes specifically discussed some form of the appeal proactive strategy and both coaches discussed aspects of the appeal proactive strategy. Student-athletes found the tactics persuasive on recruiting visits when given the opportunity to witness other student-athletes in the program perform well. For example, student-athlete nine mentioned this passage from his recruiting visit.

You know that is where all the good DMR’s ran and coach like made sure in his email, he emphasized make sure you are there at 11 for the DMR. Like you need to see the DMR and um I will never forget it because (school) had like two teams up there, they looked really good. It was a big pack (school) was in there too, (school), (school), and (school) and all these teams and (school) ended up winning. (Name) was the anchor, you know who that is and ah, so he finishes and wins by like a lot, just made the other guys look like little kids, and coach (name) walks over and he’s like “anchor closed in 4:07” and its like ok (laughing), like that was sweet, alright (student-athlete nine).

This example perfectly encapsulates the appeal-recruiting tactic. The coach utilized his fast runners to display to the potential student-athlete how fast they can become in the program. In turn, this is playing on the individual student-athlete’s dreams about becoming a fast runner in the future. In addition, this is taking place on the track of the case study institution, which can symbolize to the student-athletes that they can accomplish their dreams at this particular institution.
Other examples of the appeal-recruiting tactic took place just within a conversation between the coach and potential student-athlete, instead of on the actual recruiting visit. For example, student-athlete one talks about how the coach discussed her potential varsity spot in the near future. “yea they told me like that I would be a key player, because they were losing a lot of their good runners so yea that was part of it, they told me I could be a really good contribution to the team which was good to hear”(student-athlete one). This passage highlights how effective this recruiting tactic can be. In this instance, we witness how the coach proclaimed to the student-athlete how a varsity spot was waiting for her. In turn, this was playing on the dreams of the student-athlete that she would be a varsity runner. Furthermore, the coach is using valance framing by taking the negative aspect of losing good runners and framing it positively to the student-athlete.

The final variation of the appeal recruiting strategy that the interviews displayed was coaches brought up expectations for the student-athlete. A workout regimen to reach those goals accompanied this to give the student-athletes an opportunity to visualize reaching their dreams and the expectations. Student-athlete eight can best demonstrate this through this passage:

oh he was just, what I liked about the (school) coach is he just really emphasized that he was going to give me that year of just getting bigger and stronger and then I would be put in the mix with the other runners and he had a lot of expectations for me in the future, so..
I just liked his recruiting strategy better than the other coaches (student-athlete eight).

In this passage, we witness student-athlete eight discussing the appeal approach by creating expectations but having a plan to reach the expectations. To the student-athletes, this not only plays on their dreams and aspirations but also makes their dreams seem more obtainable to the
student-athlete. This is a powerful recruiting tactic; to certain student-athletes this can be the major catalyst in the selection process of the student-athlete.

Coaches from this study have utilized this tactic at times. Furthermore, they have expanded on it by implementing practice video to give the student-athletes visual proof of the success their student-athletes have made. This passage from coach one demonstrates this recruiting tactic:

I started to see some huge breakthroughs this week and I had some really good comparison videos. So I sent them and I got a good amount of responses saying wow, because I sent them my videos of practice, and I can do this for you too. They are like wow that is so exciting; I really want that (coach one).

We see that effectiveness of this strategy, especially when you have ways to help that student-athlete visualize themselves achieving their dreams. The interviews suggest it is more than just saying to the student-athletes that the coach can help them be great, instead, it is about displaying to the student-athlete whether through visual aids or comprehensive training strategies that the coach will make them great with their own program. This demonstrates that limiting the information asymmetry more effectively can be done by adding extra mediums (videos) into the recruiting process, or by being specific and providing a guide to the student-athlete to help them achieve their dreams.

Overall, the theme of the appeal recruiting strategy seems to be a powerful recruiting tactic. This tactic is displayed through an exceptional performance by current student-athletes, by a story framed discussion about a student-athlete’s future from the coach or by utilizing other visual aids to help student-athletes visualize their dreams. The interviews suggest this that
tactically is not as prevalent as others are but may be one of the more persuasive recruiting tactics for certain student-athletes.

**Pushing “Success”**

The final theme that emerged from the research was the tactic of pushing “success”. This happened during communication opportunities where the coach would frame nearly every aspect of the recruiting in a “success” sense. To clarify, messages said are worded as, either we are the best at a certain subject or are building to be the best. This strategy eliminates or minimizes negative aspects about one’s institution all the while, limiting information asymmetry about one's institution. Furthermore, in scenarios where it is not possible to be the best or building to be the best, the coaches will do their best to avoid the subject matter and reinstall new subject matter into the conversation. This tactic has been seen in the past on a much larger scale from “mega” sports advertising that relied on a similar strategy (Preuss & Alfs, 2011).

Three interviewed student-athletes specifically discussed pushing “success” and both coaches discussed aspects of the pushing “success” strategy. Student-athletes found the tactic persuasive because of the bombardment of constant success pushed at them. For example, student-athlete six gave this passage about this tactic:

> A lot of it was just gauging interest at couple of them would mention academics, vaguely, but it usually in the line as of what are you interested in and then I would tell them and they would say well our school is good at this, this and this, and this is what could help with that interest (student-athlete six).
We can see that this strategy is very common amongst coaches and may be the reason that this tactic was not as prevalent amongst the participants as the other tactics. For example, coach one said this passage:

The success in the jumps, everywhere else is just a building process and so we sell it between those two and we say, getting kids like you in based on their event is going to help us have success here so we can eventually be a national champion team. So you find success somewhere and then you sell the success on that (coach one).

This passage demonstrates how often this valence framing mechanism is used. This technique allows you to limit information asymmetry while all the while staying optimistic or utilizing the spoils of a program's previous success. In turn, the student-athletes receive a signal that is positive and avoids negative aspects. Which is some circumstance can eventually influence the student-athlete to commit to that institution.

Overall, the pushing “success” tactic may not be the most persuasive but it is a tactic that is utilized in more scenarios than other tactics. In turn, this tactic is very common and the participants were not as adamant about its influential characteristics, thus this appears to be a tactic that needs to be done but does not necessary give you a better opportunity to persuade student-athletes to attend your institution. In the same sense, if your institution is not using this tactic, your recruiting strategy falls behind other institutions drastically. In other words, this tactic needs to be done to maintain effective contact but does not further enhance an institution’s recruiting strategy.
Summary

As a result of these interviews several themes emerged to help understand the most effective recruiting tactics. These themes included; personalization of recruiting tactics, create a comfort level with the student-athletes, comparison tactics, appeal proactive tactics, and pushing “success”. These themes will be explored in conjunction with the research questions and will be further analyzed in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Analysis

This has been a study of the most effective recruiting tactics in recruiting NCAA division III cross-country student-athletes. The process of recruiting student-athletes is a complex reciprocal exchange of signals between both the coaches/recruiters and the student-athletes. With the reciprocal nature of this exchange, students do not stumble into an institution probabilistically. Instead, individuals select institutions and institutions select individuals (Pyrooz & Densley, 2015). Thus, the goal of the recruiting process and a vital factor in the selection process is the aspect of limiting/minimizing information asymmetry between the parties involved in the exchange. In a vast majority of cases, the institution that best minimizes information asymmetry between themselves and the student-athlete will “win” that recruiting battle for the specific individual.

The framework used to analysis the recruiting process in this study is the signaling theory and framing theory. Signaling theory provides a lens that is focused on how to minimize information asymmetry. In addition, it utilizes a timeline (signaler, signal, receiver, and feedback) (Connelly et al., 2011). In order to improve the “signal” portion of the signaling theory, the framing theory was added to bring more depth to the possible analysis of the recruiting tactics being utilized.

Gender appeared to influence many responses about effective recruiting tactics. Four out of 9 interviewed student-athletes were male and rest were female. The research highlights that there are discrepancies about which tactic in particular influences each gender more. In addition, the geographic location of the home-town with regards to the proximity to the case study
institution affected the recruiting process. In turn, different tactics were perceived to be more influential than others were at times for these two “local” student-athletes.

The purpose of this research is to create a better understanding for which recruiting tactics are the most influential for NCAA Division III cross-country student-athletes. The research questions aimed to explore the most effective recruiting tactics. In addition, this research will highlight the difference in perspective compared to the recruited student-athletes and the recruiting coaching staff. Several themes emerged during the interviews such as: personalization, creating a comfort, comparison recruiting, appeal proactive recruiting strategy, and pushing “success”. The research questions and results of these emergent themes will be explored in further detail.

**RQ 1:** Which recruiting tactics/strategies did Division III student-athletes feel were the most effective?

The previous research on college recruiting was very limited and primary focused on broad categorical tactics, instead of dissecting the root of the influential recruiting tactics at work. Nevertheless, Goss, Jubenville, and Orejan (2006) found that: “degree program”, the opportunity to play, head coach, athletic facilities, and academic support services were significant factors for non-revenue student-athletes (cross-country).

**Personalization**

The tactic of personalization through different mediums and communication opportunities proved to be an effective recruiting tactic for the student-athletes. There was two ways personalization was done; these were “made me feel wanted/ made me feel like I would be good here”.


Personalization is such an effective recruiting tactic largely because of the arena recruiting takes place in. To further elaborate, in most recruiting scenarios there are going to be multiple colleges all recruiting the same individual so the signal frequency is going to be high from multiple signalers. Thus, the signaling environment is going to be extremely noisy and most messages will be thrown aside (Connelly et al., 2011). Receivers will not respond to the signal if they are not looking for it or do not know what to look for. Thus, the extent to which the receivers scan the environment for signals plays a major role in the effectiveness of a signal (Connelly, et.al, 2011). Nonetheless, signals that feature levels of personalization (adding extra personal information, handwritten letter, etc.) are going to improve signal observability of said signal. In other words, these personalized signals stand out amongst the barrage of signals from other institutions. Thus, to the student-athletes they seem like an influential recruiting tactic.

The second aspect is medium in which the personalized recruiting tactic is taking place. Text messaging seemed to be a medium in which much of the personalized recruiting was done. Text messaging is a medium that is less noisy because student-athletes are extremely versed in cell phone usage techniques. In addition, text messaging is a medium that student-athletes are very comfortable with. In turn, this created great signal observability along with great signal substance.

The most important aspect with personalized recruiting is the notion of framing involved with each individual signal. More specifically, it was the use of semantic framing (framing is concerned with the phrasing of terms) where the creation of the signal provided student-athletes with the content needed and the feeling of “being wanted” while giving coaches the opportunity to sell aspects of the program needed to minimize the information asymmetry between the parties. Personalized messages allowed certain attributes that pertained to the student-athlete to
be filtered into the conversation while leaving others behind. Thus, creating one of the most influential but time-consuming recruiting tactics.

**Create a Comfort Level**

The recruiting strategy of creating a comfort level with the athletes through communication outlets with the coach was an effective recruiting strategy. Although creating a comfort level with the current student-athletes proved to be a prevalent theme to emerge as an effective recruiting strategy.

The interviews demonstrate that the student-athletes realize that in many cases coaches/recruiters are going to say what they want to hear. In turn, for many of them they wanted the things the coaches were saying reinforced by the current student-athletes on the team. Thus, this leads into a want by the student-athletes to verify the signal honesty of the coach and the program (Connelly, et.al, 2011). Along with the notion of verification by the inclusion of student-athletes in the recruiting process, the interviews suggest that student-athletes wanted to seek support for the college experience. The collaboration proactive tactic satisfies this want to limit information asymmetry by providing current student-athletes to support the recruit in the upcoming college experience (Magnusen et al., 2014).

The final aspect of the creation of comfort level comes from the coalition proactive recruiting tactic. The coalition-recruiting tactic refers to the coaching staff relying on help from influential agents (Magnusen et., 2014). In most scenarios that refers to past family members, but the interviews highly suggest that the current student-athletes can be those influential agents that help persuade potential student-athlete to commit to one’s institution. In other words, the
interviews suggest that the potential student-athletes really see highly of the individuals already on the roster and can be the most influential recruiting variable.

**Appeal Proactive Recruiting Strategy**

The recruiting strategy of appeal proved to be an effective recruiting tactic to influence student-athletes. In particular, males seemed more influenced by the appeal proactive tactic than females according to the interviews. The appeal proactive recruiting strategy focuses on playing to the student-athletes dreams, ideals, and value. This was demonstrated by exciting events on campus for the student-athlete to witness, coaches displaying expectations for the student-athletes and by using story framing to play on the student-athletes dreams.

This strategy emotionally appeals to student-athletes, which in turn minimizes information asymmetry by playing on the student-athletes dreams and informing student-athletes about what they may become (Magnusen et al., 2014). This tactic’s power stems from the story-framing concept. Coaches select the key theme of eventual success to signal to the student-athletes, which for most college runners is their personal dream (Hallahan, 1999). In other words, coaches performed story framing that involves selecting key themes or ideas that are the focus of the message and utilizing a variety of techniques that support that theme. In turn, this creates a powerful emotional arousal that many student-athletes find very influential. The expression and reconstruction of emotions within a particular narrative boundary, storytelling provides individuals with a familiarity where alternatives can be explored and different perspectives can eventually be accepted (Garcia-Lorenzo, 2010). The alternatives in the context of college recruiting are attending a certain institution. Signaling to student-athletes a narrative that concludes with them achieving their goals and dreams not only opens their mind to one’s
particular institution, but also in some cases is the most influential strategy for recruiting student-athletes.

The research has focused on effective recruiting tactics from the perspective of the student-athletes. Personalization, create a comfort level, and appeal were the recruiting tactics that most emerged and were seen as favorable from the perspective of the student-athletes. This next section focuses on the most effective recruiting tactics from the perception of the coaches. Now, there is some overlap in the tactics highlighted, but we can see with this simple comparison some tactics that were not seen as favorable from the perspective of the student-athletes.

Gender Differences

As alluded to earlier in this section, there are some discrepancies on the effectiveness of certain recruiting tactics that are based on the gender of the student-athlete. The student-athlete interviews suggest that the appeal recruiting tactic when utilized with athletic success is more influential for male student-athletes. On the other hand, female student-athletes were highly influenced by the creating comfort recruiting tactic. More specifically, the female student-athletes were highly influenced when the recruiting tactic featured support from the coach but mainly current student-athletes on the team.

Male Athletic Appeal Recruiting. The interviews highlight within the appeal recruiting tactic that males find it very persuasive when the appeal recruiting tactic is discussing the potential athletic success of the student-athlete. An example of the effectiveness of this tactic to male student-athletes is demonstrated by this passage from student-athlete nine.

I mean it made as a kid, it made me feel good about myself that people were reaching out to me, it was almost validated by that because I don’t know I always thought I could be
better than I was, and I thought that you know and there were people out there that thought that too, so that was cool you know as a kid, that was cool (student-athlete nine).

As many of the previous recruiting studies have stated, males are more persuaded by athletic-related recruiting tactics, whether that would be head coach, or other athletic factors (Stotlar, 1976; Mathes & Gurney, 1985; Gabert et al., 1999). Thus, it comes to no surprise that this theme emerged for males in this study. Males response is favorable to recruiting tactics focused squarely on athletic achievement.

**Female Support Recruiting.** Males were influenced with athletic achievement, while on the other hand, the women interviewed were adamant about the persuasive mechanisms of highlighting support for the student-athletes. This primary focused on having current student-athletes be reducing uncertainty about the college experience for the female student-athletes. This is demonstrated by this passage from student-athlete five.

So I think it was just the positive and the constant like reminder that I wouldn’t be the only one in it. I would have an atmosphere around me where kids are going through the exact same thing I am, so I would have a big support group, because I think that is what really pulled me into coming to run (student-athlete five).

This yearn for support for the female student-athletes is supported in other aspects of sports literature. Women tend to demonstrate behavior that revolves around needing to be accepted before they can properly feel comfortable in the environment and compete at a high level (Niilampti, 2000). Thus, this desire to have support in the new college environment gives way to this recruiting tactic being extremely influential for female student-athletes.
RQ2: Which recruiting tactics/strategies did Division III coaches/recruiters feel were the most effective?

The level of the effective of recruiting tactics from the perspective of the coach has largely been ignored in published research, besides a few noticeable exceptions. Magnusen et al. (2014) created a comprehensive list of effective proactive recruiting tactics. These would consist of rational, exchange, appeal, legitimating, apprising, pressure, collaboration, ingratiation, consultation, personal appeal, and coalition. Magnusen (2011) also studied qualities and characteristics of the recruiter (2011). His study featured Division I women’s soccer coaches. A multiple regression analysis was used and determined that political skill, agreeableness, neuroticism, behavioral integrity, career record and NCAA rank had a significant impact on recruiting effectiveness.

Personalization

The personalization of signals from the perspective of the coaches is seen as an effective mechanism to separate your recruiting strategy from other recruiting strategies. In turn, the high signal substance is an effective way to minimize the information asymmetry between the coaching staff and the student-athlete. Creating a recruiting environment that student-athletes know the coaches care about the athletic well-being of the student-athletes but also the personal well-being of the student-athlete is vital. As mentioned before, the recruiting environment is not just institutions selecting student-athletes, but student-athletes selecting institutions (Pyrooz & Densley, 2015). Recruiting student-athletes on a personal level as well as an athletic level can be a very effective recruiting tactic.
As mentioned previously with the student-athletes, the use of text messaging in the recruiting process is effective in the perspective of the coaches as well. Utilizing text messaging as the medium ensures that student-athletes are at least seeing your signals. Text messaging has the least noisy signaling environment of the mediums. Student-athletes are well versed in cell phone language and skills. Furthermore, student-athletes are very comfortable using their cell phones.

Create a Comfort Level

The coaches’ interviews highlight the importance of creating a comfortable environment with the student-athlete. This is primarily done through high signal frequency along with high signal honesty. In other words, when information is produced often and honest, information asymmetry is limited significantly. Coaches strongly advocated maintaining contact with the potential student-athletes a minimum of twice a month. At the NCAA Division III level there is unlimited contact between the coach and potential student-athlete. Thus, utilizing that notion to one’s advantage can further minimize information asymmetry and more specially create a feeling of openness between themselves and their receivers (Janney & Folta, 2003). Furthermore, coaches were adamant about having honest signals for it will dismantle the perception the institution has created if signals were found dishonest (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012).

One of the coach’s interviews said that having the potential student-athlete meet and talk with current student-athletes was the most important aspect of the recruiting process. What this tactic does is create a mechanism to test signal honesty for the student-athlete. Furthermore, the use of student-athletes can be either with the collaboration proactive tactic or the coalition proactive tactic (Magnusen et al., 2014). In other words, the use of the collaboration tactic has
the current student-athletes providing support to the potential recruit, while coalition tactic is using the current student-athletes as influential agents to the potential recruit.

**Comparison Recruiting**

The use of comparison recruiting was discussed often in the interviews with the coaches. The coaches utilize this recruiting tactic throughout the course of the recruiting process. The coaches utilize this tactic to present differences between themselves and other institutions. This is done by framing favorable attributes of the institution against other institutions. Normally done using rational (real world evidence) persuasion or apprising (how offers personally benefit the student-athlete) persuasion (Magnusen et al., 2014).

The coaches interviewed stressed strongly the importance of using high signal honesty when utilizing the rational persuasive recruiting tactic. Furthermore, they stressed keeping the recruiting environment positive and not utilizing “negative” recruiting, instead simply point out facts to the potential student-athletes. The reputation of the institution and program is too important to being potentially tarnished on “negative” or false recruiting. In addition, another important aspect that the comparison recruiting allows is that an institution can bring to the forefront attributes that are unique or special to the particular institution.

**Appeal Recruiting**

The coaches’ interviews highlight the usage of the appeal proactive recruiting tactic when paired with visual aids to enhance the message. Appeal recruiting is primarily focused on playing to the student-athletes dreams, ideals, and value (Magnusen et al., 2014). The coaches find success in sending comparison videos of current student-athletes displaying the improvement they have made under the current program. This strategy allows coaches to not only tell student-
athletes how good they could become but also provide evidence to prove their statements. In turn, this strategy is providing student-athletes with a way to visualize themselves accomplishing their dreams, which is an influential aspect of the appeal strategy.

The coaches’ interviews suggest that when using the appeal proactive recruiting tactic it was more effective in limiting information asymmetry when multiple mediums are being used in the recruiting process. What makes this strategy successful is the use of the story framing concept. Coaches select the key theme of eventual success to signal to the student-athletes, which for most college runners is their personal dream (Hallahan, 1999). Coaches performed story framing that involves selecting key themes or ideas that are the focus of the message and utilizing a variety of techniques that support that theme. In turn, this creates a powerful emotional arousal that many student-athletes find very influential. The expression and reconstruction of emotions within a particular narrative boundary, storytelling provides individuals with a familiarity where alternatives can be explored and different perspectives can eventually be accepted (Garcia-Lorenzo, 2010). Thus, this strategy can be an effective recruiting strategy for coaches to use if versed in the ability to story frame.

**Pushing “Success”**

The coaches’ interviews highlight the use of valence framing throughout the communication. Valence framing is a form of framing in which a stance is expressed explicitly with descriptions in either a positive or a negative outlook (Lagerwerf, Boeynaems, Van Egmond-Brussee & Burgers, 2015). According to the interviews, this is done in a positive outlook. For the most part, this has the coaches framing everything as positive about the program. In turn, this means either framing the signals as “we are the best” or “we are going to
be the best in time”. This strategy attempts to avoid or dismantle negative signals about one's program (Preuss & Alfs, 2011). This technique allows coaches to limit information asymmetry while all the while staying positive and utilizing the spoils of the program's previous success. The student-athletes receive a signal that is positive and avoids negative aspects.

As stated previously, this may not be the most persuasive tactic listed, but it is very common. Thus, this tactic is an expected tactic; one expects it to be performed but does not necessarily influence student-athletes to commit. In the same sense, if this tactic is not performed, one’s institution will fall behind in the recruiting races.

Up to this point, the research has focused on effective recruiting tactics between the perspectives of the student-athletes vs. coach. This was the primary focus of this study, but the final two research questions pose as supplemental findings to further understand the recruiting process and decisions being made that influence the recruiting besides basic recruiting tactics. This next research question explores the perception of competition in the recruiting process and how that influences recruiting tactics by the coaches.

**RQ 3:** Does the perception of competition for recruiting vs. actual competition in recruiting cause a coach to utilize messages with negative valence more often?

**Student-Athletes Perspective**

In the interviews with the student-athletes, they pointed out that they believe that the perception of competition in the recruiting process leads to more contact opportunities and more personal contact opportunities between themselves and the coaches. This makes sense because the goal of the recruiting process is to best minimize information asymmetry between the student-athlete and the institution. Thus, the increase in signal substance and the signal frequency
of the signals will minimize information asymmetry between the parties involved (Janney & Folta, 2003). When the aspect of competition with other institutions is brought into the recruiting process, institutions will attempt to better minimize information asymmetry over other institutions recruiting the same student-athletes (Connelly, et. al, 2011).

In the interviews with the student-athletes, they mentioned that negative recruiting was utilized at times, especially when the institutions knew which other institutions were recruiting them. The interviews suggest that using this tactic was not effective for the student-athletes that participated in this study. Instead, other recruiting tactics were much more influential than using negative valence.

**Coaches Perspective**

In the interviews coaches stated that the perception of competition does not affect the way recruiting is performed. The reasoning is that the coaches understand they will always be competing against other institutions for high-quality student-athletes. In addition, the amount of time and resources coaches have at their disposal does not allow many alterations to the recruiting strategy at the case institution. Thus, once a recruiting strategy is in place, the likelihood of an alteration to that strategy is very unlikely.

When discussing the aspects of negative recruiting the coaches were adamant to not spread false accusations about institutions. In other words, they will take part in comparison tactics that compare factual evidence, which in turn may seem negative. The interviews explained this process as simply pointing out facts, they will not spread false information about an institution. Thus, to answer the question from the coach’s perspective they do not alter
recruiting strategies when the perception of competition is there, but will utilize negative tactics in recruiting in the context of pointing out factual evidence about another institution.

The final focus of this study is to explore whether signal frequency or signal substance is more vital to the recruiting process. In this next section, we will examine this very question.

**RQ 4:** In regards to recruiting, is signal frequency more vital to successful recruiting or is the substance of the signal?

In the realm of collegiate recruiting this question of which is more vital to the recruiting process between signal frequency and a signal substance has not been explored in previous research. This study found that there is a divide between the student-athletes and coaches’ perspectives on which is more vital to the recruiting process.

**Student-Athletes Perspective**

The interviews suggest that student-athletes think that the substance in each signal is more important in the recruiting process than the signal frequency in a majority of circumstances. They think that being more personal and having personalized messages which are aspects of signal substance are more important to the recruiting process. Student-athletes disliked the large piles of junk mail and overbearing nature of the high signal frequency some schools utilized in the recruiting process. Furthermore, student-athletes were adamant about personalized messages and signal substance being a better way than high signal frequency to reduce information asymmetry. On the contrary, student-athletes also mentioned that if a certain level of signal frequency was not achieved they would begin to forget about an institution or assume that the institution was not interested in them. Thus, the interviews suggest that a combination of both moderate signal frequency along with high signal substance is possible the best way to limit
information asymmetry within the college recruiting process. Unfortunately, no exact numbers on what would constitute high frequency were discussed. Although, student-athletes seemed comfortable with one or two signals per month, and expanded real-time contact (text messages/phone calls about the success of the student-athlete’s performance) during in-season parts of the recruiting process.

**Coaches Perspective**

The interviews suggest that coaches think that the signal frequency is more vital to the recruiting process over signal substance. Coaches do not understate the importance of signal substance but there thought process revolves around signal cost. Coaches are aware that not every signal they send to the student-athletes will be received. In other words, not every email will be read, not every letter will be opened, not every phone call will be answered, and not every text message will be responded to. Thus, coaches suggest that it is more vital to have high signal frequency because there is no guarantee that the receiver will even receive one’s signal. This leaves having less signal frequency and more signal substance as a potential risk of resources. Thus, the signal cost is better with high signal frequency and lower signal substance because a number of resources to create one signal is fewer concerning high signal frequency.

Coaches also, discussed how with the increase in signal frequency allows for more opportunities to make a connection with the student-athlete even if the signals do not contain as much signal substance. This potential situation can improve an opportunity to effectively minimize information asymmetry and recruit the student-athlete. As with the student-athletes, the coaches understand there is a line of how high your signal frequency can be before you become overbearing to the student-athletes. Thus, the coaches use two signals per month for each
student-athlete they are actively recruiting whether they would be a call and email or a text and letter is determined at where the student-athlete is in the recruiting process.

Examining the question of is signal frequency more vital or is signal substance to the recruiting process is a question that is very difficult to answer. From the interviews, we can see a divide in perspectives between the coaches and student-athletes but a couple of things are agreed upon. Those being, that a there is a fine line between effective high signal frequency and being overbearing with signals to the point that student-athletes dismiss your recruiting strategy altogether. Furthermore, a lack of signal frequency causes student-athletes to either forget about one’s institution or assume the institution is no longer interested in the student-athlete. As for signal substance, both parties think it is important to the recruiting process, but coaches are concerned with the signal cost it takes to consistently produce high-quality substance filled signals. Thus, the answer to this question seems to be that both signal frequency and signal substance play vital roles in the recruiting process. In addition, in order to have a well-rounded recruiting strategy both need to be highly considered when planning one’s recruiting strategy.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Mark Northuis is the current Head Cross-Country/ Head Track and Field Coach at Hope College. According to Mark Northuis, it is “tough to make chicken salad without chickens. Recruiting student-athletes who match your program is key to having a successful program. You need to have student-athletes who are at least a good fit for your institution and program so they will have an above average chance of developing into a top runner” (Northuis, 2016). These quotes stress the importance of having an effective recruiting process. In this study, a focus was on improving the previous research through the use of communication theory and a qualitative approach to a field primarily studied in quantitative measurement. This research illuminated not only the most effective recruiting tactics but also examined why these tactics are as effective as they are in the recruiting process. In addition, this study explored the perspective of the most effective recruiting tactic through the eyes of the student-athletes as well as the coaches to better understand the content through a multitude of perspectives.

Two theories were combined to create a framework for this study: Spence’s signaling theory and framing theory. These two theories provided a framework for the research to explore and describe the college recruiting process in NCAA Division III at an institution in the Midwest of the United States.

In addition to the guiding theoretical frameworks, a qualitative methodology was utilized. Individual interviews were selected as the most appropriate means for gathering data as interviews allowed individuals to share their unique experiences and narratives in relation to the college recruiting process. Both the student-athletes and the coaches were addressed in the data collection to highlight the perspective of both parties involved in this process.
Eleven interviews took place during a 4-week period. Two interviews were with coaches while the rest were with student-athletes. The interviews yielded many themes regarding effective recruiting tactics.

Five major themes emerged during interviews: personalization of recruiting, the creation of comfort level, comparison recruiting, appeal recruiting, and the pushing of “success”. There was a divide between the perspectives of student-athletes and coaches on which tactics were more influential. The student-athletes thought the personalization of recruiting, the creation of comfort level, and appeal recruiting were the most effective. While the coaches thought all five tactics were effective strategies.

A major factor in all the recruiting strategies was the use of framing. Story framing was used specifically in the appeal recruiting tactic. Valence framing was used during the “pushing” success recruiting tactic while semantic framing was effective in personalizing one’s recruiting material. Along with framing being a vital factor to the recruiting strategies, the use of medium also demonstrated being an important aspect of the recruiting strategies. The use of video was very effective in the appeal recruiting tactic because it allows student-athletes an opportunity visualize success. In addition, the medium of text messaging was effective due to the comfort student-athletes have within the medium and the personalization of the medium.

Finally, the use of negative valence was divided amongst student-athletes and coaches. The student-athletes were not influenced by the comparison recruiting tactic (the tactic is which negative valence is used) while coaches believed it was an effective tool to separate one’s institution with other institutions. The use of negative valence is only to be used with rational
persuasion. The coaches were adamant about not spreading false information about other institutions because of the value in an honest reputation.

Both signaling theory and framing theory emerged as relevant and important tools, allowing the researcher with a lens to understand the effectiveness of these tactics. The framing theory gave definition and meaning to the tactics while the signaling theory gave definition to the tactics and an overarching goal to the recruiting process. Without this lens, the effective recruiting tactics would not have been explained and mystery would surround their popularity.

This study was just a start and possibly opened more doors than it closed, but what this study hoped to accomplish was to further examine the college recruiting process with more depth than previous work. This study wanted to create a more in-depth analysis to recruiting tactics and give an honest depiction of the college recruiting process in NCAA Division III athletics.

**Strengths**

A strength of this study was the use of a qualitative method that allowed personal stories and narratives to be told regarding the college recruiting process, which leads to a more in-depth analysis of the recruiting tactics being utilized. This also gave deeper insights into the mindset of student-athletes during the entirety of the long and sometimes stressful college recruiting process.

A second strength of the study was the use of interviews from both the student-athletes and coaches to compare their narratives about the most effective recruiting tactics. This strength illuminated different aspects that were not agreed upon between the two parties as effective recruiting strategies. In addition, it allowed for separation between the perspectives to be revealed.
This study has achieved its purpose of exploring the college recruiting process with a qualitative and communication framework. A snapshot of the most effective recruiting tactics was revealed within the research and this study is a surprising source of rich data.

Limitations

Every research project, including this thesis, has limitations. Factors related to the methodology as well as the topic under investigation limit the generalizability, utility, and application of the findings. The limitations are significant; but they do not invalidate the findings and their ability to inform future research on the subject matter.

The specific topic under investigation limits the generalizability of the findings. College recruiting is a complex process with many variables that directly affect the outcome of the process. At the same time, recruiting is a specific process that is not recreated in many circles outside of recruiting in general. These circumstances limit the ability to apply conclusions gained about this case to other dissimilar situations.

Another limitation of this study was the small number of participants and the case study structure of the research. It would have been ideal to explore more than just one institution about their effective recruiting tactics. Furthermore, 20-30 participants total with 10-15 being coaches, and 10-15 student-athletes would have been an ideal sample for this type of research. With a larger sample pool along with multiple institutions from various geographical locations involved, it would have allowed the researcher to more fully validate emerging themes.

There are managerial limitations to this research, while acknowledging limitations in the generalizability and potential concerns of validity, this project advances the study of college
recruiting further. Conclusions reached through this investigation can be used to inform further research and improve college recruiting.

**Potential Implications for College Recruiting**

By identifying and exploring themes from the interviews, perhaps future coaches/recruiters will be able to adapt or retool additional recruiting strategies. Identifying the most effective recruiting tactics could improve the effectiveness and efficiency of collegiate recruiting. This research could allow institutions to reexamine their recruiting process and make alterations to improve the ability to recruit high-quality student-athletes. Furthermore, this research could potentially make the recruiting process easier and less stressful for the student-athletes involved. Coaches/recruiters may use this study to further expand on this knowledge and improve the college recruiting research even further than the limitations of this study.

**Future Research**

Future research starts with an expansion of this current study to other institutions across the country. By accessing varied geographical locations, larger sample sizes, and various levels of talent across the roster, a detailed study may yield a yet unknown treasure trove of themes and recruiting tactics that could be a positive contribution to the entire effectiveness of the recruiting process.

Future research could pinpoint specific variables and create similar studies around those variables. These variables include but are not limited to gender, race, location and socioeconomic class. All these variables could illuminate interesting aspects of the recruiting process that become altered by the inclusion of any of these variables. Overall, it could potentially give new
themes the opportunity to emerge, and allow for college recruiting to be more efficient and effective.

Future research could also make use of conversation analysis between the coaches and the student-athletes. This will better examine the framing aspects and word usage that are entwined into the college recruiting process. This method may provide the best display of the college recruiting process and could lead to some breakthroughs in the field. Potentially, this could illuminate the most effective recruiting tactics, and lead to even more efficiency and effectiveness in the recruiting process.

Further research could include the use of different theoretical lenses. While signaling theory and framing theory provided effective lenses for this study, there is room to experiment with different lenses and examine the findings. Using different lenses could possibly allow new themes and recruiting tactics to emerge. In addition, the emergence of a communication theory that was created for recruiting could be a direction that this research takes in the future.

Final Word

Recruitment of college athletes is a complex activity featuring a diverse group of factors. Recruiting is an unsolved equation that includes but is not limited to talent, fortitude, health, personality, success, and academic prowess (Sturtz, 2013). This complex equation is a key aspect to the overall success of any collegiate program. The complex equation of recruiting is far from solved, but this research has inched us that much closer to being able to solve this equation. Eventually, one would hope to take steps to make the art of recruiting, the science of recruiting. With this study, we took steps towards that direction.
References


http://www.ncaa.org/about/ncaa-core-values


ID#: College Recruiting

**Directions:** Please complete the following *demographic information about yourself.*

1. Your age: __________ years old

2. Your gender is (please check one): Male____ Female_____ Other_____

3. Your athletic standing/position is (please check one): Freshman___ Sophomore_____ Junior_____ Senior_____ 5th Year Senior_____ Coach_____

4. Are you a local resident? ______ If not please tell us, where you are from? __________
Appendix A: Student-Athlete Questions

- To start, can you briefly tell me when the recruitment process began for yourself?
  - Which year in high school?
  - Which institutions?

- Next, what were the tactics being used early on by the coaches/recruiters?
  - What were they doing early on in the process to try and create interest?
  - What information were the institutions really focusing on?
  - How did you respond to these early recruitment efforts?
  - How were they presenting the information?

- As time went on in the recruiting process did you notice changes in the messages being sent?
  - Were the messages positive or did they begin to use some negative stimuli?
  - When you were being contacted by many schools did the institutions use more positive or negative messages?
  - Did more schools enter the recruiting fold? If so what were some of the things they focused on for recruiting you?
  - How often were you communicating with these schools?
  - Did you tell other schools who was also recruiting you?
  - What was the main form of communication? (Text, emails, letters, phone calls)

- Overall, what was the deciding factor that made you choose here over all the other institutions?
  - What messages were they specifically telling you?
  - Were the messages strictly positive or were there some negative stimuli?
- What did this institution do differently in the recruiting process to all the other schools?
- How often were they contacting you? Were they contacting you more than other institutions?
- What were the main forms of communication they were using?

• Any final thoughts or anything you would like to add?
Appendix B: Coaches/Recruiters

- To start, when do you normally start the recruiting process for student-athletes?
  - Is it at a certain time in high school?
  - Does the location of the athlete change when the recruiting process starts?
  - Do you initiate the contact or does the student-athlete initiate the contact?

- Next, what is your recruiting philosophy for cross-country/ distance runners?
  - What are your recruiting strategies?
  - What aspects of the program do you stress to athletes?
  - How do your recruiting tactics change as the recruitment process plays out? Or does it change?
  - Does your process change when you suspect other institutions are recruiting this athlete?
  - How often do you contact recruits?
  - What are the main mediums you use for maintaining contact for recruits?
  - Do you utilize more positive messages or negative messages in recruiting?
  - Do you alter the amount of positive vs. negative messages as the recruiting process becomes more competitive?
  - How important is minimizing the information gap between your program and potential recruits?

- Overall, what are the most effective recruiting tactics?
  - Is it more about the substance of the messages or the volume of the messages?
  - What separates your recruiting philosophies from other programs?
  - Have aspects of recruiting changed in the last ten-twenty years?
• Any final thoughts or anything you would like to add?
Part 2: Project Description

Is this research?

Research is defined as a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. (45 CFR 46.102(d))

a. Is this project being conducted solely to fulfill course requirements with no intention to share the results beyond the classroom in which it is assigned? Yes ☐ No X

b. Is this project a quality assurance activity or program improvement activity with no intention to share the results beyond the University community? Yes ☐ No X

c. Is this project a pilot study, or would you like to use this study to launch future investigations in which you would re-use this data? Yes ☐ No ☐

d. Would you like to consider using this study for publication or dissemination at a later date, including at research presentations on- or off-campus? Yes ☐ No ☐

If you answered “yes” to “a” or “b” and:

- If you answered “no” to “c” and “d,” then you are not conducting research under the federal definition. You may stop here and you do not need to submit this to the IRB.

- If you answered “yes” to “c” or “d,” then you are conducting a type of research. Please continue with this form.

e. Do the proposed activities involve a systematic approach? A “systematic approach” involves a predetermined method or a plan for studying a specific topic, answering a specific question, testing a specific hypothesis, or developing theory. A systematic approach incorporates collection of data, either quantitative or qualitative, or specimens; and analysis of the collected information. Yes ☐ No X

If NO, please explain why the proposed activities do not involve a systematic approach:

This study is utilizing a case study model. All participants in the study will be either coaches or student-athletes from the case study institution. This research will be done through in-depth qualitative interviews of 10-15 student-athletes/coaches. The interviews will be set up with pre-interview contact with the coaching staff of the case study institution. The student-athletes will range from first-year freshman- 5th year senior. Interviews are expected to last between 20-60 minutes. Interviews will be set up at various public locations at the convenience of the participant. Interviews will be audio recorded. After review and transcription, the audio recordings will be erased to protect participant identity and potentially confidential information that was discussed during the interview. All interviewed participants will be given
designated subject numbers and pseudonyms in order to protect their identity during the research. All information that could identify when the participants meet with the researcher: the location, the date and the times will be eliminated from transcripts and results.

f. Is the intent of the proposed activities to develop or contribute to generalizable (scholarly) knowledge?  Yes
   X No □
   If NO, please explain the intent of proposed activities and explain how the proposed activities are not intended to contribute to generalizable knowledge:

If you answered “no” to all questions “a” through “f,” you may stop here and submit the form.

If you have included sufficient information, the IRB will send a confirmation that your project is “Not defined as research” under the federal definition.
2.1 Are Human Subjects involved?

A human subject is defined as a living individual about whom an investigator obtains either 1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual; or 2) identifiable private information. (45 CFR 46.102(f))

Does your research involve human subjects or official records about human subjects?   Yes X No □

If you answered “no” to question 2.1, complete the remainder of section 2 and submit the form.

2.2 What is the purpose of the research? (Approximately 250-500 words; descriptions are to be written in future tense.) What question(s) do you hope to answer? Summarize the proposed research/activity stating the objectives, significance, and detailed methodology. Briefly describe your data collection method (for example: observations, survey, experimental design, psychological tests, interviews, etc.) Copies of all data collection instruments must be attached to this application. Use lay language:

The purpose of this research is to examine the NCAA Division III college recruiting process in a qualitative study to be better informed about the recruiting tactics involved in persuading high-quality student-athletes to attend an institution. The theoretical lenses that will be used are the signaling theory and framing theory. This will be a case study on a NCAA Division III cross-country program in the upper Midwest of the United States of America.

The questions I hope to answer are: 1. Which recruiting tactics do Division III student-athletes feel are the most effective, 2. Which recruiting tactics do Division III coaches/recruiters feel are the most effective, 3. Does the perception of competition for recruiting vs. actual competition in recruiting cause a coach to utilize messages with negative valence more often, 4. In regards to recruiting, is signal frequency more vital to successful recruiting or is the substance of the signal.

The objective of this study is to elicit a vivid picture of the most effective tactics for NCAA Division III college recruiting. Previous research has covered this topic matter through quantitative surveys. The research lacks in-depth understandings of the perspectives of entities that make up the college recruiting process. Thus, the significance of this research is to allow for an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of entities of the college recruiting process through qualitative interviews.

In-depth qualitative interviews of 10-15 student-athletes/coaches will be used to gather data. Retaining of gender will be used so identification of gender differences in recruiting is possible. The student-athletes will range from first-year freshman- 5th year senior. Interviews are expected to last between 20-60 minutes. Interviews will be set up at various public locations at the convenience of the participant. Interviews
will be audio recorded. After review and transcription, the audio recordings will be erased to protect participant identity and potentially confidential information that was discussed during the interview. All interviewed participants will be given designated subject numbers and pseudonyms in order to protect their identity during the research. All information that could identify when the participants meet with the researcher: the location, the date and the times will be eliminated from transcripts and results.

Interviews will be set up first through initial contact and approval from the cross-country coaching staff of the case study institution. The sample is a convenient sample but will yield adequate findings for the subject matter being studied.

2.3 When is the data collection for the research intended to begin and end?

Late October 2016 to February 2017 (enter month/year)

Please note that research cannot begin until this project has been approved by the IRB. While multi-year projects can be approved, a continuation form must be filed within 1 year of the approval date. Such a form can be filed twice before the protocol must be re-reviewed. Please note that any point in time that substantive modifications to a protocol occur would require another review.

2.4 Sponsor (Funding agency, if applicable): ____

- Is this project being supported by Federal funding? Yes
  - No X
- Is this project being supported by any funding source outside of UWSP? Yes
  - No X
- Is this project being supported by any funding sources within UWSP? Yes
  - No
2.5 Exemption

Do you believe that your project may fall under one of the categories of research that are exempt from this policy? If you wish to request an exemption from continued IRB oversight in one of the federally-approved categories, please select the category below that applies and continue with the form. If you have questions, more information about the exemption categories can be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website: http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.101

The following categories of research are exempt from this policy:

☐ (1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

☒ (2/3) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:

(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

☐ (4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available OR if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

☐ (5) Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine:

(i) Public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.

☐ (6) Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to
be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

_The IRB will determine qualification for exemption based on information detailed in the remainder of this form._
### Part 3: Participants

#### 3.1 Special Populations

Do participants belong to a group for which special protections are required? Special precautions must be included in your research procedures if any of these special populations or research areas are included.

**Are any of the subjects:**

| (a) minors (under 18 years of age)? | Yes | (a) sexual behaviors? | Yes |
| (consent from parent & possibly subject required) | No X | (b) drug use? | Yes |
| (b) legally incompetent? | Yes | (c) illegal conduct? | Yes |
| No X | (d) use of alcohol? | Yes |
| (c) prisoners? | Yes | No X |
| No X | *(x)* |
| (d) pregnant women, if affected by the research? | Yes |
| No X | *(x)* |
| (e) institutionalized? | Yes |
| No X | *(x)* |
| (f) mentally incapacitated? | Yes |
| No X | *(x)* |

**Does the research deal with questions concerning:**

| (a) sexual behaviors? | Yes |
| (b) drug use? | Yes |
| (c) illegal conduct? | Yes |
| (d) use of alcohol? | Yes |

#### 3.2 Participant Pool:

**Expected number of participants or sample size:** 10-15 total, 10-13 student-athletes (5-6 males, 5-6 females), and 2 coaches.

#### 3.3 Describe your intended participant pool in terms of:

a. **Gender, race or ethnic group, age range etc:**

Participants will be 10-15 men and women student-athletes and coaches from the case study institution. The ages range from 18-24 for student-athletes and 25-45 for coaches. There will be various ethnic backgrounds involved in the study. All participants will either be a current cross-country student-athlete or coach.

b. **Affiliation of participants (e.g. institutions, hospitals, general public, students, etc.)**

Participants will be either current cross-country student-athletes of the case study institution or will be cross-country coaches of the case study institution.

c. **Participants’ general state of mental health:**

Participants of this study will not be asked to reveal their state of mental health, however the mental health of the participants will be comparable to
the general populations of coaches and student-athletes from which they are being drawn. Mental health is not of interest as part of the proposed study,

d. Participants’ general state of physical health:
   Participants of this study will not be asked to reveal their state of physical health, however, being that these participants are college student-athletes or college coaches, it is likely that the participants will have an above average state of physical health.

3.4 Explain why you have chosen this particular group for study. If participants belong to one of the protected classes above, this justification is especially important. If participants are affiliated with a particular institution, please explain:

   College student-athletes and coaches have been chosen for the proposed study because the college recruiting process has only been studied in a limited perspective. The primary parties involved in college recruiting are the athlete and the coach/recruiter. Thus, in order to effectively study college recruiting the participation by student-athletes and coaches is vital. Furthermore, the ability to answer questions on effectiveness of recruiting tactics can be extremely beneficial to many institutions. Also, this topic is incredibly interesting to me and will potentially aid me in my post-graduate career.

3.5 What is your relationship to the participants? (e.g., are you their classroom instructor, a nurse in a clinic whose participants are seeking medical care, etc.? If your only relationship is as a researcher or student researcher, then there is likely no relationship.)

   Some of the participants may be people I know from my professional work experience, however, it is likely that there will be no existing relationship between myself and the majority of the participants.

3.6 Participant Recruiting

   a. Will participants be recruited? Yes

   X No

   If not, please explain (recruitment may not be involved in some types of classroom research):

   b. Describe the method for recruiting participants. If recruitment will involve advertising, posters, or scripts, please provide copies:

   Interviews will be set up first through initial contact and approval from the cross-country coaching staff of the case study institution. By creating this relationship early on in the process an encouraging atmosphere from the coaching will result in more cross-country runners participating. Second, individuals will be
recruited from a list generated by the case study program. From there, agreed upon locations and times for interviews will be established.

3.7 Exclusions: If certain populations will be excluded from this study, please describe and justify the criteria for exclusion. Describe the method you will use to identify and exclude the individuals from the study. For example, if you are excluding pregnant women from a nutrition study due to health concerns for the fetus, describe that here.

The only population involved is student-athletes and coaches from the case study institution. Thus, everyone who does not fall into these categories will be excluded.

**Part 4: Detailed Procedures**

4.1 Procedures: Describe how subjects will be involved in detail. Describe the setting in which the participants’ involvement will take place. Where will they be? Will they be alone or in a group? Will there be any specific conditions? How long will it take?

In-depth qualitative interviews of 10-15 student-athletes/coaches will be used to gather data. Participants are free to answer the questions to the depth they wish to. Interviews are individual and expected to last between 20-60 minutes. Interviews will be set up at various public locations at the convenience of the participant. Interviews will be audio recorded.

4.2 Will you be the one administering the procedure, or will someone else do it for you? If someone else, describe how they will be involved and what type of oversight, training, and instructions they will have in order to conduct this procedure.

I will be the one administering the interviews.

4.3 Will the participants experience any discomfort? Yes

X No

If yes, please explain. (Discomfort may include physical or emotional discomfort.)

In a vast majority of the interviews there will be no discomfort. There is the possibility of creating emotional discomfort from bringing up the recruitment process and eventually the college decision. Some participants may find animosity or sadness directed to institutions that did not recruitment them or treated them poorly during the recruitment process. But, chances are the student-athlete would not attend an institution they felt mistreated them during the recruitment process. Furthermore, this is a case study so all student-athletes are attending the same institution.
4.4 Will deception or false or misleading information be used in your procedures? Will you withhold information such that the ability of the subject to understand the true nature of the study would be affected?  
☐ No ☑ X

If yes, explain why deception is necessary for this study and describe how you will debrief participants, and procedures you will follow if a participant decides to withdraw his/her consent.

4.5 Electronic/Internet/Online research

a) Are you conducting a survey using any electronic media?  
☐ No ☑ X

*If “no,” please skip to Part 5.*

b) How will data be transmitted? Is a survey host (Qualtrics, Select Survey, Survey Monkey, etc.) used? Will the host retain identifiable data? Will the data be encrypted?

c) Explain how data are maintained. Will it be in individually identifiable form, aggregate form, anonymized?

d) Will data be shared?  
☐ No ☑ X

How? With whom?

e) Will aggregated anonymized data be made publicly available?  
☐ No ☑ X

If yes, will subjects be re-identifiable? Why or why not?

f) Describe the data security plan (e.g., how you will keep your data secure):

g) Will survey results be posted on a website that could be accessed by individuals other than the investigators?  
☐ No ☑ X

If yes, please explain:
h) If a survey link is sent to participants, will the URL for the survey include information that could identify individuals, such as a student ID?  

☐ No ☐  Yes

What is the URL? ______

i) If you are sending out an email invitation to subjects to complete a survey:

Will you assure that the participant will only see his/her name?  

☐ No ☐  Yes

Will you have the “read receipt” function turned off?  

☐ No ☐  Yes

If you answered “No” in question “i”, please explain:

j) If your survey contains questions where the subjects choose from a drop-down menu, do they have the option to choose “no response” or to leave the question blank?  

☐ Yes ☐  No ☐  No drop-down questions ☐

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**Part 5: Risk/Benefit Analysis**

5.1 **Risks:** Describe all risks, perceived and actual, that participants might encounter during this study. Risks may be physical, social, psychological, legal, or risks to employment or economic well-being. A response of “Not Applicable” will not be accepted.

Risks could include emotional risk from bringing up the recruiting process. Some participants might find anger, sadness or discomfort talking about the process of their college decision. Some individuals may have animosity to institutions that did not recruit them. Furthermore, some participants may not have received 100% truthful recruiting pitches from institutions, thus, animosity could be expected in those cases.

Economic risks include the time to do the interview. If the participant is being interviewed they are not working, which could cause some small economic risks.

Psychological risks include the revealing of the recruiting process. Some student-athletes may be oblivious of all the tactics being used in the recruitment process and could be taken off-guard of how many tactics are involved in the recruitment process.
5.2 Is the research Minimal Risk?

**Minimal risk** means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. (45 CFR 46.102(i))

Do you believe those risks will be no greater than minimal?  
Yes  X  No

Explain why:

These risks are extremely small, because the risks are relying on the notion that participants had a negative college recruitment process. In most circumstances that is not the case. Also, if that was the case, it is highly unlikely they would be attending the institution that played a role in a negative recruitment process.

5.3 If risks are greater than minimal, describe the following:

N/A  X

a) Explain why these risks are essential to your study.

b) What have you done to minimize risks without compromising your research objectives?

c) What protections have you put in place to minimize the potential consequences to the subjects if the risks become realized?

d) What procedures have you established for reporting adverse events should they occur?

5.4 Will the participants directly or indirectly benefit from being a part of your study?  
Yes

☐ No  X

Please explain:

This study will in most instances will not benefit the participants. The only benefits for the participants will be the opportunity to discuss their personal recruiting processes which could bring up positive messages. The primary benefits lie in the expansion of knowledge within the college recruiting field as a whole.
5.5 What are the benefits to society at large as a result of this project? Are there other benefits?

The benefits revolve around the expansion of knowledge based on recruiting in NCAA Division III. Also, this study will further enhance the art of recruiting for all entities. This study can potentially bring clarity to effective recruiting tactics.

5.6 Will you offer incentives, reimbursement of costs, or other compensation to participants?

□ No X

Yes

**PLEASE NOTE:** There are UW System & IRS guidelines on awarding of prizes and incentives. Please see [https://www.wisconsin.edu/financial-administration/financial-administrative-policies-procedures/fppp/f46-prizes-awards-and-gifts/](https://www.wisconsin.edu/financial-administration/financial-administrative-policies-procedures/fppp/f46-prizes-awards-and-gifts/) Also, gift card guidelines exist. Those may be obtained from Sharon Courtney or Liz Hendricksen (ehendric@uwsp.edu)

If yes, what will you offer as incentive, reimbursement, or compensation and under what conditions will participants receive it?

### Part 6: Confidentiality/Anonymity

6.1 Can the subjects be identified directly or through any type of identifiers?

□ No X

Yes

If “yes,” please explain:

6.2 If the data collected in your research will be anonymous, explain the procedures you will use to create and preserve anonymity:

□ N/A (My research does not involve anonymous data.) X

**Anonymity** occurs when the identity of the subject to whom a particular set of data pertains is completely unknown, even to the researcher.

6.3 If the data will not be anonymous, explain the procedures you will use to protect the confidentiality of your data:

a) During the data collection process:
All interviewed participants will be given designated subject numbers and pseudonyms in order to protect their identity during the research.

b) While results are being analyzed:

All information that could identify the participants when meeting with the researcher: the location, the date and the times will be eliminated from transcripts and results. After review and transcription, the audio recordings will be erased to protect participant identity and potentially confidential information that was discussed during the interview.

c) In publication or other reporting of results:

All interviewed participants will be given designated subject numbers and pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. Participants will be offered the right to review transcripts for accuracy. The transcripts will be shared with the participant via email upon the participant’s request.

d) In storage after research is complete and results are reported (Note: all materials must be retained and available for inspection by the faculty advisor and/or IRB audit for a minimum of three years).

Data collection notes will be stored in a locked shelf at the researcher’s residence. The audio data will be erased upon transcription, while the digital data will be stored on a password-encrypted file on researcher’s personal laptop.
Part 7: Consent

7.1 Describe how you will obtain informed consent from your participants: In what setting? Who will be present? Will there be an opportunity for questions to be asked and answered?

Consent forms will be explained and signed prior to the interview. In addition, participants will be informed that the risks of the study do not exceed those of everyday life. The location will be the previously agreed upon location, which is at the convenience of the participant. Only the researcher and participant will be present. Before signing the consent form, questions may be asked and answered.

7.2 Describe how you will assure that participation is voluntary:

PLEASE NOTE: If subjects are children and they are capable of assent, they must give their permission, along with that of their parent, guardian, or authorized representative. ALSO NOTE: A school district’s personnel cannot give permission or consent on behalf of minor children.

Before the interview begins I will have all participants sign a consent form and reassure them of the voluntary nature of themselves doing this interview. Furthermore, participants can choose to answer which questions they feel comfortable answering and can leave anytime.

7.3 Special circumstances: Do any special circumstances exist within your participant pool that will require a modification to your consent form either for comprehension purposes or to otherwise modify a standard consent process? Examples may include populations that require bilingual forms, etc.

Yes  □  No X
If yes, please describe:

7.4 Request for Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent:
If you wish to request a waiver of documentation of informed consent, explain how your research plan meets each of the criteria below.

a. The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects:

b. The waiver will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects:

c. The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver:
Requesting a waiver of documentation of informed consent does NOT guarantee that the IRB will grant it. All researchers must submit consent forms with their application materials in order for the IRB to determine whether the informed consent process may be modified.
CHECKLIST OF SUBMISSION DOCUMENTS

☐ Typied and Completed IRB Application
   • Application must be signed by all investigators and advisors.
   • Direction page should be removed prior to submission.

☐ Consent form(s)
   • Standard consent form(s) should include explanation of procedures, risks, safeguards, freedom to withdraw, confidentiality, offer to answer inquiries, third party referral for concerns, and participant (and/or guardian) signature. Sample consent forms can be found at http://www.uwsp.edu/acadaff/orsp/irb/Pages/default.aspx

☐ Questionnaire/Survey Instrument
   • The final version of the Questionnaire/Survey instrument must be attached. Also, if the survey is being conducted verbally, a copy of the introductory comments and survey questions being asked must be attached to this form.
   • If your survey includes focus group questions, a complete list of the questions should be attached.
   • For research using a published/purchased instrument, a photocopy of the complete survey will suffice.

☐ The CITI basic course on Human Subjects Research must be completed by all individuals involved in conducting this research project before this form is submitted.

☐ Other Forms as Needed
   • Other forms may include recruitment materials, advertising documents, debriefing scripts, etc.

Please do not staple your submissions documents.
Institutional Review Board Action:

_____ Project is exempt from IRB review under category ________Exemption holds for 5 years.

_____ Project is exempt from IRB review under category provided minor modifications are completed. Exemption holds for 5 years.

_____ Project is approved through expedited review.

_____ Project is approved through expedited review provided minor modifications are completed.

_____ Project is approved through the full board review process; date of meeting: ______

_____ Project is approved through the full board review process, provided minor modifications are completed; date of meeting: ________________

_____ Additional information is requested. Please see attached instructions and resubmit.

_____ Project is not approved at this time.

_____ Project does not include human subjects.

_____ Project is not defined as research.

Signature: __________________________________________________________

Institutional Review Board Chair or Designee Date
Informed Consent to Participate in Human Subject Research

Title of Study: NCAA Division III Cross-Country Recruitment Through the Lens of Signaling Theory and Framing Theory: A Qualitative Study

Dear Participant,

Cam Tiberg, a graduate student in the Division of Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, under the supervision of Professor Jim O’Connell, is conducting a study examining the recruiting tactics that takes place within the college recruiting process.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to recall your personal recruiting experience through a semi-structured interview that will take about 20-60 minutes of your time. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you begin the interview, you may choose to stop participating or refrain from answering questions. If you choose to stop participating all together, your interview will then be removed from the project altogether. We anticipate no risk to you as a result of your participation in this study other than the inconvenience of the time to complete the interview and the possibility that discussing your recruiting process will bring up negative memories. Again, if you feel uncomfortable at any time, please feel free to stop the interview.

This study is confidential and all interviewed participants will be given designated subject numbers and pseudo-names in order to protect their identity during the research. All information that could identify when the participants meet with the researcher: the location, the date and the times will be eliminated from transcripts and results. After review and transcription, the audio recordings will be erased to protect participant identity and potentially confidential information that was discussed during the interview. The research will be transparent with findings, allowing participants to request transcripts for validation, clarity, and accuracy. The reason for transparency is to guarantee the narratives being told by the coaches and student-athletes are indeed accurate and give a clear representation of the recruiting process you were attempting to describe. If you request transcripts, they will be emailed to you soon after the request. Data collection notes, interviews, and transcripts will be stored via password-encrypted files. The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study. The data collected will be used in the researcher’s thesis for the completion of the graduate program in Division of Communication at UWSP.

While there may be no immediate benefit to you as a result of your participation in this study, it is hoped that valuable information will be gained about college recruiting process and the tactics utilized in said process.
If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact me:

Cam Tiberg  
Division of Communication  
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point  
Stevens Point, WI 54481  
Phone. 715-781-6105  
Email. ctiberg@uwsp.edu

If you have any complaints about your treatment as a participant in this study, please call or write:

Dr. Debbie Palmer, Chair  
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
Department of Psychology  
Science Building, B303  
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point  
Stevens Point, WI 54481  
Phone. 715.346.3953  
Email.dpalmer@uwsp.edu

Although Dr. Palmer will ask your name, all complaints are kept in confidence.

This research project has been approved by the UWSP Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

I understand this consent form and the meaning of this information. I understand what I am being asked to do and my rights as a study participant. I understand that I may stop my participation at any time.

Signature .......................... Date............................