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# Analysis of Factors Influencing College Choice Decisions of Mid-Major NCAA Division I Swimmers

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ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLEGE CHOICE DECISIONS OF  
MID-MAJOR NCAA DIVISION I SWIMMERS

BY

KADEN HUNTRODS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science

Major in Sport and Recreation Administration

South Dakota State University

2019

ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLEGE CHOICE DECISIONS OF  
MID-MAJOR NCAA DIVISION I SWIMMERS

KADEN HUNTRODS

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the Master of Science Degree in Sport and Recreation Administration and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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This thesis is dedicated to my family.

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ABSTRACT

ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLEGE CHOICE DECISIONS OF  
MID-MAJOR NCAA DIVISION I SWIMMERS

KADEN HUNTRODS

2019

Student-athletes face an ever-increasing challenge of selecting a higher education institution that meets their desired criteria academically and athletically. Coaches and recruiters have sought to discover how to best recruit student-athletes over the history of college athletics. Understanding these factors can assist coaches and athletes to create athletic programs to best fit the desired student-athletes. This study examined the factors that influence the college selection process of mid-major NCAA Division I, male and female swimmers. The instrument utilized in this study was the Student Athlete College Choice Profile Survey (SACCPs). The participants included 141 student-athletes from seven mid-major NCAA Division I university swim programs representing two regions of the United States of America. The article discusses the most important factors utilized in the selection process of a higher education institution by mid-major NCAA Division I swimmers. The findings displayed a difference of top ranked influential factors and the degree of importance between genders. Practitioners may use these findings to streamline their marketing and recruiting efforts.

ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLEGE CHOICE DECISIONS  
OF MID-MAJOR NCAA DIVISION I SWIMMERS

**INTRODUCTION**

Potential college student-athletes selecting universities are making a decision that may have immediate life impacts such as moving from home and long-term impacts such as the desired educational program. Additionally, student-athletes may face future impacts such as career choices and financial investments, as well as, selecting an athletic program for the continuation of their athletic career (Bandre, 2011). Coaches at the various levels of college athletics hope to create the most welcoming and appealing environment possible for potential and current student-athletes. Athletic departments invest millions of dollars to attract student-athletes to their university (Ching, 2018). As coaches better understand the factors that have the greatest influence, they may be able to streamline their budget in more specific high interest areas for their potential and current student-athletes while avoid spending on areas that are not high interest to recruits (Pauline, 2010). This is especially important for mid-major NCAA Division I swimming programs.

As a non-revenue generating sport, college swimming has historically been one of the top college sports on the potential “chopping block” when an athletic administration’s budget becomes strained or reduced (Schumann, 2013). College swim programs at various levels of competition have been cut or reduced to a single gender sport in recent history with the threat of more programs being cut in the future (Schumann, 2013; Titlow, 2017). Examining factors that are most influential to potential student-athletes not only helps build highly competitive and talented programs, but also assists in developing



strategies to keep swimming programs in existence (Ryan, Groves, & Schneider, 2007). Furthermore, examining the factors of college choice decisions can assist institutions in saving marketing funds, by utilizing strategic marketing, where marketing targets the most relevant factors and reduces ineffective marketing strategies such as marketing to irrelevant populations and places (e.g., high-level student-athletes both within the United States and abroad; Popp, et al., 2011).

The factors influencing college choice among potential student-athletes continue to evolve. Previous studies have examined the following sports: baseball (Pauline, Pauline, & Stevens, 2004), softball (Kankey & Quarterman, 2007), lacrosse (Pauline, 2010) and track and field (Lim, Paulson, Romsa, Walker, & Romsa, 2017). As previously stated, athletic departments spend a large number of resources to attract potential student-athletes (Ching, 2018). As coaches better understand the factors that have the greatest influence, they may be able to streamline their budget and recruiting efforts in specific, high interest areas (Pauline, 2010). Little research has been conducted focusing on the factors that influence the college choice in the sport of swimming. Due to the differences in the rank order of importance of college choice factors, and the difference between sport and divisions there is a need to examine how mid-major NCAA Division I swimming athletes choose their institution. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the factors influencing the college choice decisions of mid-major NCAA Division I swimmers.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Prior to conducting our study, a thorough review of the literature was performed to identify potential college choice motivational factors from prior studies, to provide a

background in this area of research through utilization methods and findings from previously conducted research studies, and to assist in the development of the current study's framework. The degree of importance from previous research and varying sports was also reviewed for comparison against the results of the current study. Previous studies have researched the motivational factors behind college choice of numerous sports, reviewing these studies provides insight into the influencers of previous student-athletes. Three streams of literature were reviewed for this study (a) studies analyzing factors influencing the college choice/selection of student-athletes, (b) studies focusing on the recruitment of student-athletes at NCAA Division I institutions, and (c) studies analyzing the relationship of gender and its influence the factors that were most salient in their college choice/selection.

### **Identified College Selection Factors Among Student-Athletes**

Previous studies have identified that prospective student-athletes are drawn to colleges and universities for a range of factors. Researchers have consistently found the importance of both academic and athletic factors in the college choice decisions of student-athletes. Institutional related factors include campus life, student residence halls, and the degree programs offered (Lim et al, 2017). Athletic related factors include the head coach, athletic related scholarships, athletic team atmosphere and athletic facilities (Vermillion, 2010).

Lim et al. (2017) found the five highest ranked sport related motivational factors in track and field athletes were opportunity to compete, head coach and coaching staff, athletic scholarship, degree programs offered, and athletic team atmosphere. The study found the head coach and coaching staff to be the second highest factor with NCAA

Division II track and field athletes. As the head coach directly reflects the program's direction, focus, and training, it is not surprising that this has been found to be a highly rated factor. Several of the highest ranked non-sport related motivational factors were found to include degree programs offered, non-athletic financial assistance, geographic location of the educational institution, and perceived total academic value of the college's degree (Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007).

While sport related factors are important to the potential student-athletes during their stay at higher education institutions, in the long-term, benefits of the academic degree chosen by the student-athlete may be the higher ranked determining factor. The academic programs that are offered, success of the institution, potential for a good career and the atmosphere of the institution have been found to be important in several studies (Pampaloni, 2010; Popp et al., 2011; Huffman and Cooper, 2012). This demonstrates athletes are recognizing the value of time invested at the higher education institution and its impact on their future beyond athletics. Location of the institution to the potential student-athletes' residence has been shown to be an important factor in some studies (Gabert et al., 1999; Lim et al., 2017). Geographic proximity, both near and distant from potential student-athletes' residence is an important factor. Non-athletic financial assistance or the potential for financial assistance to be provided to student-athletes in the form of academic scholarships have been found to be influential in a previous study by Popp et al. (2011). The reputation, positive or negative, of the higher education institution has been found to be an important factor in several studies as student-athletes look to their professional career after graduation (Lim et al., 2017; Pauline, 2010).

## **The Recruitment of Student-Athletes at NCAA Division I**

There are currently 136 male and 199 female collegiate swim programs at the NCAA Division I level (Athnet, 2019). The total available fully funded scholarships for men's swimming programs are 9.9, while fully funded women's programs are 14 (Athnet, 2019). These scholarships are allotted to student-athletes by the coaching staff based on the potential student-athletes' ability to place on the scoring team at conference and championship competitions as well as overall contributions to the swim program. Athletic scholarships may be broken into percentages in an effort to provide multiple student-athletes with scholarships (Allen, 2018). The chance of an athlete receiving a full scholarship is rare and rarer still for freshman athletes due to the large risk in investing in a young student-athlete (CollegeSwimming.com, 2008).

Little research has been done on the factors that influence the college choice in the sport of swimming (Popp et al. 2011). Research in this area needs to be conducted to provide precision and clarity in recruiting efforts and techniques conducted by the higher education instruction's athletic staff to acquire highly skilled student-athletes. Coaches and recruiters have desired to understand these influencing factors for many years (Lim et al, 2017).

### **Gender Comparison**

Male and female student-athletes have been found to have corresponding motivational factors (Gabert et al., 1999). In Gabert et al. (1999)'s study, freshman student-athletes for revenue and non-revenue generating sports listed the head coach as the most influential factor in determining their choice of college. Similar studies

conducted by Lim et al., (2017) and Pauline (2010) found that while the factors are similar between the genders, the order of importance differed. In lacrosse, male and female student-athletes ranked the head coach as highly influential, however, men ranked the head coach as more influential than their female counterparts (Pauline, 2010). In track and field student-athletes, four of the five top ranked factors were mutual between the genders. While the highest rated motivational factors have been found to rank similarly between the genders (Andrew et al, 2016) with slight differences in order of importance (Goss, Jubenville & Orejan, 2006), the middle and bottom motivational factors have been found to differ to a higher degree (Kankey & Quarterman, 2007). High ranking factors include degree programs offered, athletic team atmosphere and opportunity to compete (Lim et al, 2017; Pauline, 2010). Middle factors for female student-athletes were found to include official campus visit, academic support services, and community, while male student-athletes ranked these factors towards the bottom of their motivational factors (Lim et al, 2017).

A study by Goss et al, (2006) and a later study by Andrew, Martinez and Flavell (2016) found that male and female athletes vary in the ranking of their top five motivational factors. Men ranked more sport related factors higher while women ranked more institution factors higher. Athletic scholarship has also been found to be ranked lower by male student-athletes than female student-athletes (Lim et al., 2017). Male student-athletes have also ranked the geographic location of the school lower than female student-athletes in several studies (Andrew et al., 2016; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007; Lim et al, 2017).

As previously conducted studies have shown, student-athletes in different sports as well as male and female student-athletes, have different motivational factors that influence their college choice process. While there is a lack of research conducted on participants in the sport of competitive swimming, it is believed that similarities exist between the student-athletes of track and field and competitive swimming. The sport of track and field and competitive swimming share a similarity of competition format, they are athletes that contribute to the team through individual competitions.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework utilized for this study was the three-stage model developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). The three stages of this model are the predisposition, search, and choice stage. The first stage, predisposition, is where the potential student-athlete decides if they want to continue onto higher education and considers all of their factors including financials and family. Family members can exert a large influence on the decision of a student, as can financial limitations (Andrew et al., 2016). The second stage, search, is where the potential student-athlete has decided to continue into higher education and begins researching potential higher education institutions and competitive swim programs. This stage is where a coach and higher education institution has the opportunity to influence a potential student-athlete through their athletic program and/or institutional features. The third and final stage is when the student-athlete chooses the institution(s) and athletic programs he/she would desire to pursue acceptance and participation in a sport program. During this stage, potential student-athletes consider several factors including the location, degree programs offered

and the cost of each institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Once a potential student-athlete has decided on a higher education institution, they have completed the third stage.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

A total of 141 student-athletes (56 men, 85 women; between the ages of 18 and 23) participated in the study yielding a survey return rate of 83%. The participants were predominantly Caucasian, 92.3 % while 6.7% were ethnic minorities including Asian, Hispanic, African American, Pacific Islander, and Multiracial. The athletes represented seven NCAA Division I universities set in two regions in the United States. The two regions were categorized as Midwest and Southwest.

### **Measures**

The instrument utilized to assess mid-major NCAA Division I student-athlete swimmers for this study was the Student Athlete College Choice Profile Survey (SACCPS) developed by Gabert et al. (1999). Similar studies have utilized this survey and produced a result of high reliability (Bandre, 2011; Crowley, 2004; Gabert et al., 1999; Goss et al., 2006; Lim et al., 2017). This survey was slightly modified to be applied to the sport of NCAA mid-major Division I competitive swimming. The questions in the survey were separated into two sections, demographic information and college selection factors. The demographic section collected information including age, gender and year of school. The second section consisted of 25 college choice factors (Table 1) covering athletic and institutional factors such as team environment, head coach, athletic facilities, on campus dorms and degree programs offered. Participating student-athletes were asked

to rank these factors through the use of a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (No Influence) to 5 (Very High Influence).

### **Procedures**

Approval was obtained from the university institutional review board to conduct this study. The coaches of each participating institution were emailed the informed consent letter for the student-athletes and the procedures for distribution of the survey. Student-athletes were informed that participation in the study was completely voluntary. Their participation was considered implied consent through their completion of the survey. No identifiers of the student-athletes were collected. At any time before or during the survey the student-athletes had the ability to refuse to participate further in or discontinue the survey for any reason without repercussion or penalty.

Data was collected through emailed links dispersed to each program's coach and then forwarded to the athletes. The survey was conducted online via QuestionPro to the student-athletes. QuestionPro is an online survey provider utilized by the researcher's university. Coaches were contacted for the duration of six weeks to ensure the greatest number of student-athlete participation in the study.

### **Statistical Analysis**

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, percentages frequency distributions, ranges, and standard deviations). Means and standard deviations were used to compare and contrast the college choice influencing factors. Additionally, t-tests were conducted to determine significant differences in college choice factors by gender.

Statistical significance was accepted at an alpha level of  $p < .05$ .



## RESULTS

A total of 142 surveys were completed for a return rate of 83%. One survey was removed from the survey due to the participant being under the age of 18, leaving 141 viable surveys used in the study. The participants consisted of 56 males (39.71%) and 85 females (59.57%) with ages ranging 18-23 years of age.

As shown in Table 1, the five overall most influential factors in the college choice process were the athletic team atmosphere ( $M = 4.23$ ), opportunity to compete ( $M = 4.18$ ), degree programs offered ( $M = 4.11$ ), opportunity to be on the scoring team ( $M = 3.94$ ) and head coach and coaching staff ( $M = 3.86$ ).

College Choice Factor	Overall		Female		Male	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Athletic Team Atmosphere*	4.23	1.01	4.52	0.67	3.86	1.21
Opportunity to Compete	4.18	1.00	4.24	0.98	4.09	1.03
Degree Programs Offered	4.11	0.95	4.14	0.90	4.04	1.03
Opportunity to be on the Scoring Team	3.94	1.02	4.02	0.95	3.79	1.10
Head Coach and Coaching Staff*	3.86	1.15	4.05	1.10	3.63	1.13
Cost of Tuition	3.67	1.16	3.62	1.18	3.71	1.14
Chance to Travel	3.44	1.35	3.58	1.31	3.20	1.38
Athletic Scholarship*	3.41	1.49	3.73	1.3	2.93	1.7
Community	3.34	1.31	3.47	1.24	3.18	1.38
Official Campus Recruiting Visit*	3.34	1.47	3.64	1.39	2.88	1.5
Location of the School	3.20	1.27	3.29	1.19	3.09	1.4
Campus Social Life	3.17	1.24	3.20	1.19	3.13	1.32
Size of the School	3.15	1.10	3.24	1.07	3.00	1.16
Academic Support Services	3.12	1.23	3.27	1.24	2.88	1.21
Athletic Facilities	2.97	1.17	3.11	1.09	2.80	1.26
On Campus Dorms	2.77	1.26	2.82	1.27	2.66	1.24
Athletic Traditions	2.56	1.26	2.67	1.22	2.41	1.30
Unofficial Campus Visit	2.44	1.31	2.42	1.38	2.48	1.22
History of the Athletic Program	2.35	1.11	2.48	1.11	2.16	1.09
Family Member	1.96	1.32	2.01	1.38	1.89	1.23
Team's Win/Loss Record	1.86	1.11	1.96	1.18	1.71	1.00
Teams in the Conference	1.81	1.14	1.73	1.12	1.93	1.17

Spiritual Guidance	1.72	1.13	1.69	1.13	1.77	1.13
Highschool Teammates' College Choice	1.56	1.01	1.56	1.06	1.57	0.96
TV Exposure	1.24	0.71	1.20	0.61	1.30	0.85

**Table1.** *College Selection Factors*

**Note.** \*Significant difference at the  $p < 0.05$  level

The top five factors for females were athletic team atmosphere ( $M = 4.52$ ), opportunity to compete ( $M = 4.24$ ), degree programs ( $M = 4.14$ ), head coach and coaching staff ( $M = 4.05$ ) and opportunity to be on the scoring team ( $M = 4.02$ ). Four of the five top factors for the male athletes corresponded to the female's factors although to a different degree of influence. The top five factors for males were opportunity to compete ( $M = 4.09$ ), degree programs offered ( $M = 4.04$ ), athletic team atmosphere ( $M = 3.86$ ), opportunity to be on the scoring team ( $M = 3.79$ ), and cost of tuition ( $M = 3.71$ ). Females listed one factor that was academic related, and four sport related where males listed two factors that were academic related and three that were sport related.

The study found four influential factors to have a significant difference between the genders as shown in Table 1. These influential factors were athletic team atmosphere, head coach and coaching staff, athletic scholarship and official campus recruiting visit. Two of the influential factors were in the overall top five factors and each of the four factors were related directly to athletics.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **Discussion**

The results suggest that athletic team atmosphere is the highest ranked influential factor followed closely by the opportunity to compete. This follows other findings in similar studies (Lim et al., 2017; Vermillion, 2010). These findings suggest that coaches

should focus on building their team atmosphere to generate a positive environment and maximize opportunities for the student-athletes to compete. The NCAA limits competitive swimming to 20 competition dates per swim season (NCAA, 2018). This result suggests that providing student-athletes with opportunities to compete may improve the team atmosphere as they are able to compete for their university or college. As student-athletes desire the chance to compete (Gabert et al, 1999), utilizing a high number of these dates may increase the quality and frequency of athletes applying to a university swim program.

The distinct finding of this study produced results that are both similar and different from previous studies. Of the top five factors, four factors were sport related and only one was related to academics. Similar to the study by Lim et al. (2017) swimmers saw the athletic factors as a main consideration in their college decision. These results suggest that coaches need to be mindful of their interactions with the potential student-athletes and their athletic program's team atmosphere. Furthermore, the findings displayed a difference of top ranked influential factors and the degree of importance between the genders. Men rated the cost of tuition higher and athletic scholarships significantly lower than women. This may be related to male swim programs having a smaller number of scholarships available compared to female programs due to incomplete or partial funding (Scholarshipstats.com, 2018). Male swimmers are less likely to receive a scholarship and/or large scholarship, which may reduce the influence of a scholarship and raise the influence of the cost of tuition.

Several of the results suggests similar trends with other sports, including the head coach, opportunity to compete and athletic scholarship being high ranked influential

factors with freshman student-athletes in research by Gabert et al. (1999), track and field student-athletes by Lim et al. (2017) and softball players by Vermillion (2010). The lowest ranked influential factors were consistent with the studies conducted by Andrew et al. (2016), Lim et al. (2017), Pauline (2010) and Vermillion (2010). These lower influential factors include TV exposure, high school teammate's college choice, team's win/loss record and spiritual guidance. As previously stated, an explanation for the team's win/loss record influential importance could be related to the fact that both swimming and track and field are a team of individual student-athletes. These student-athletes qualify for the NCAA championship competitions on an individual basis, compared to sports such as football, volleyball, and basketball where the team's overall success determines if the team is able to compete in championship competitions. A student-athlete can be a champion while the teams win/loss record does not demonstrate overall excellence.

Factors ranked in the middle were also similar to the studies by Lim et al. (2017) and Vermillion (2010) such as the size of school, official campus tour, and community. Some of the similarities to track and field athletes may be due to their similarity of a team consisting of individually competing athletes. Student-athletes train and compete as a team, but the athletes themselves compete in individual events for the team at the competition. Similar to studies on Division II track and field (Lim et al, 2017) and community college softball (Gabert et al., 1999) student-athletes, participants ranked athletic facilities in the middle of the factors. This may be due to limited funds for the facilities for non-revenue generating sports, reducing the expectation of athletic facilities.

The findings from the study suggest differences from other sports. Compared to track and field athletes (Lim et al., 2017), swimmers ranked athletic team atmosphere significantly higher. This may be due to the proximity to each other throughout competition and training compared to track and field athletes who practice in separate areas within the venue and dissimilar events. Swimming student-athletes also ranked degree programs offered higher when compared to football student-athletes (Huffman, 2011; Huffman & Cooper, 2012) and slightly higher than track and field student-athletes (Lim et al., 2017). Swimming student-athletes also ranked TV exposure lower than football student-athletes (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). This may be due to the overall lack of TV exposure provided to the sport of swimming during the non-Summer Olympic years (Bianco, 2016).

Lastly, the study showed men rated head coach and coaching staff lower than their female counterpart in contrast to findings by Pauline (2010) with lacrosse where men rated the head coach higher than the women. This difference may be due to the lower number of men's programs at the Division I level in the country. Women have a larger selection of programs compared to men and therefore the head coach and team atmosphere may be higher factors. Men also ranked the importance of athletic scholarship significantly lower than their female counterparts. This may be due to fewer athletic scholarships available to male swimmers (ScholarshipsStates.com, 2018) and therefore men may not expect a large athletic scholarship or any athletic scholarship at all. Strongly resembling the study by Lim et al (2017), men ranked their official recruiting visit significantly lower than female student-athletes. Again, this finding may be due to the smaller number of programs available to male swimmers and therefore they

may not have high expectations on their official campus visit compared to female swimmers.

## **Conclusion**

The study's results indicate that athletic team atmosphere is the most important motivational factor overall for mid-major NCAA Division I swimmers in the college choice decision. Further influential factors in order of importance were the opportunity to compete, degree programs offered, opportunity to be on the scoring team and head coach and coaching staff. This study also found that the male and female student-athletes matched four of the five top factors with a slight difference in order. This similarity is supported studies by Lim et al. (2017) and Andrew et al. (2016).

Based on the findings of this study, mid-major NCAA Division I swim coaches should assess the perceived athletic team atmosphere of their student-athletes and evaluate if changes need to be made for a more positive team atmosphere. The coaches should also assess the degree programs offered by the institution, express the opportunities to compete in the program along with competing on the scoring team at conference meets. The coaches should consider the importance of their personality and coaching style as perceived by potential student-athletes. Recruiting student-athletes that reflect or are compatible with the coaching style and values of the swim coaching staff and the environment of the team should be a focus during the recruiting process. The swim coaching staff may also benefit from utilizing slightly different recruiting methods for male and female swimmers. Focusing on factors that were ranked more influential with each gender may improve the quality of recruiting potential student-athletes. The athletic department and coaching staff need to optimize their competition schedule to provide the

most competitions to their student-athletes. To assist in recruiting efforts, marketing and recruiting practitioners need to present the athletic team atmosphere, degree programs offered and opportunities for student-athletes to compete at their institutions.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

A limitation for this study was that it only collected data from seven mid-major NCAA Division I swim programs in the Midwest and Southwest. For future studies, the researcher would like to expand several areas of the research and data collection. The first expansion would be the increase of the overall size and scope of the study to include athletes from higher-ranking schools and include universities in other regions of the United States. This increase in the number of student-athletes and competitive teams could provide greater insight into the motivational factors for these student-athletes. Second, including athletes from lower divisions such as NCAA Division II, III and NAIA would also address more gaps in the literature by including lower ranking divisions to discover differing influencing factors. Third, future studies should consider including private universities that have affiliations to specific religions where the spiritual guidance factor may be of higher importance. Finally, studies including the sport of competitive diving would enhance the body of knowledge. While diving and swimming like track and field are two separate sports, they are scored together at dual, conference and championship level competitions. Understanding the factors that motivate student-athletes that are grouped together can be beneficial to the overall success of the swimming and diving team. These changes in the level of competition, lack of athletic scholarship, an affiliation of the higher education institution and geographic location may produce differing results.

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