

## Over-Signing in College Football: Why Does It Occur?

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*Abstract:* This study sought to determine what factors influence the decision-making processes of college football coaches when over-signing a recruiting class and/or roster. NCAA Bylaws limit the number of scholarships that Division I-A member institutions can recruit for their program (85) and annually (25). Over-signing occurs when college programs sign more prospective collegiate athletes to a National Letters of Intent (NLI) than they have room for on their roster or in their recruiting class. Over-signing results in coaching staffs taking a scholarship away from a returning player or later informing an incoming player he will not be extended a scholarship. Although many sport journalists have written about this issue, it has not yet been examined through an empirical study. Seventeen college football coaches and personnel staffers were interviewed for this study. Our findings show that over-signing occurs because it is an accepted practice that can give coaches a competitive advantage, while also accounting for college athlete attrition rates and indecisive recruits. Additionally, over-signing was frequently viewed as another roster management practice that allowed coaches to remove underperforming players while adding new players. Participants' suggested the adoption of an early signing period as a possible solution to counteract the negative attributes of over-signing. Thus, this study educates athletic administrators and fans on the complex recruiting and roster management practice of over-signing.

Over-signing in college football is a controversial practice among many athletic administrators, coaching staffs, fans, and current/prospective collegiate athletes. Doyel (2010) explained that coaches who choose to engage in the practice of over-signing risk negatively impacting current/prospective athletes, so actions should be taken to curtail such behavior. The term over-signing is commonly used by sport journalists to describe the practice of athletic departments signing more recruits than they have available scholarships spots for, or actively encouraging current collegiate athletes to leave to have additional scholarships (Botkin, 2016). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) limits the total number of scholarships that football teams competing at the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level can offer overall (85) and extend on an annual basis in recruiting (25). NCAA Bylaws refer to scholarships as *counters*.

NCAA Bylaw 15.5.6.1 states there shall be an annual limit of 25 on the number of initial counters (per Bylaw 15.02.3.1) and an annual limit of 85 on the total number of counters (including initial counters) in football at each institution (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2016). Essentially, at any time a FBS program may only have a maximum of 85 scholarship players on its roster. Furthermore, during any one recruiting year, a team may only offer 25 high school seniors and/or junior college players an athletic scholarship; transfer players

can also be added in place of new recruits. Although over-signing can and does occur in multiple sports, it has received the most attention from sport journalists and fans in regard to FBS football (Bateman, 2011; Doyel, 2010; Feldman, 2007; Infante, 2011; Staples, 2011a; Staples, 2011b; Towers, 2011; Whiteside, 2011). This increased attention can be attributed to the spotlight the media places on college football and the size of football teams; if school signs 37 players the media is likely to notice (Staples, 2009).

Over-signing occurs if a school signs a prospective collegiate athlete to a National Letter of Intent (NLI) that brings their total number of counters above the NCAA limit of 85 (i.e., the team has more players that they are promising to provide a scholarship than the NCAA permits), or if a team signs more than 25 incoming collegiate athletes to a NLI. Even though NCAA rules permit institutions to over-sign a recruiting class by extending up to 28 NLIs, some college football fans view this practice as immoral, arguing that it allows schools and coaches the opportunity to be deceitful with recruits (Doyel, 2010). The deceit occurs when coaches promise a player an athletic scholarship only to withdraw it before that individual completes his degree or, in some cases, before they enroll and become a student. Athletic programs have the ability to offer one year and multi-year scholarships (NCAA, 2017), so coaches have options in recruiting.

The purpose of this study is to determine what motivates coaches to over-sign. College football coaches and personnel were interviewed to gather their thoughts on why over-signing is utilized, what the positives and negatives of over-signing are, and what can be done to improve the recruiting process for coaches and players. This study adds significant information to an often discussed – though yet to be empirically analyzed – aspect of college football recruiting. The current system, which former University of Florida President Bernie Machen referred to as disgusting, nefarious, and reprehensible (Machen, 2011), has resulted in players losing scholarships after already being enrolled at an institution or having their offer rescinded just prior to enrollment. The loss of an athletic scholarship may force a player to transfer if he and/or his family are unable to afford the institution. From the incoming student's prospective, over-signing can hurt him by severely limiting his options or possibly eliminating the option of attending college completely. The lack of empirical studies examining the utilization of over-signing in college football combined with the subjective reporting of sport journalists provides athletic administrators and fans with only a minimal, exploratory understanding of this issue. Therefore, this article will discuss the recruiting process and recruiting oversight as well as incorporate the views of college football coaches and decision-makers to provide a more holistic view of over-signing.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Recruitment Process**

Collegiate athletes face a major life decision when choosing a college to attend to further their education and hone their athletic craft (Klenosky, Templin, & Troutman, 2001). The effort by colleges and universities to attract new players is known as recruiting. College football programs devote an enormous amount of resources (e.g., money, time, and human capital) in hopes of persuading high school and junior college football players to attend their schools (Dumond, Lynch & Platania, 2008). The acquisition of elite talent enables teams to experience success on the field, which is necessary to viably compete for participation in lucrative bowl

games as well as conference championship games. Evidence suggests that recruiting does indeed affect team performance, which can explain why schools are willing to spend large amounts of money on recruiting in college football (Langelett, 2003). One reason that players choose to attend an institution is due to the relationships that they have formed with a coaching staff prior to enrollment (Cooper, 1996). Thus, coaches play a vital role in the acquisition of talent. Klenosky et al. (2001) found that the coaching staff can help athletes feel comfortable with their school choice, thus programs compete to hire the best recruiters to pursue prospective players. Although collegiate athletes may have different factors that influence their college choice, non-athletic related factors are just as important as athletic-related factors (Letawsky et al., 2003).

Feldman (2007) described all aspects of the recruiting process, which include the scholarship offer process, film study, summer camps, traveling, official recruiting visits, and unofficial recruiting visits. These visits allow recruits to observe the football program, meet prospective teammates and/or fellow high school players, familiarize themselves with the coaching staff, and obtain information about academic programs offered by the university. Once a prospective collegiate athlete receives a scholarship offer, he may verbally commit at that time or officially commit on National Signing Day (the first Wednesday of every February) by signing a NLI. The decision to have an official National Signing Day was made by the NCAA as a way to account for the fact that conferences had their own signing days, which cluttered the recruiting calendar (Associated Press, 1981). It is common for prospects to verbally commit to one school and then later de-commit before National Signing Day to accept an offer from another, sometimes larger, program.

Collegiate athletes have traditionally been the targets of close observation in which the media play a key role (Hill, Burch-Ragan, & Yates, 2001). Prospective collegiate athletes, especially those that are high profile or highly ranked, receive a great deal of media attention. Recruitment decisions are frequently speculated upon and discussed by recruiting-specific sites such as 247Sports, ESPN's Recruiting Nation, Rivals, and Scout. Furthermore, recruitment decisions are sometimes broadcast on television, which has made signing day a popular media day and one in which some coaches receive bonuses based on their finish in recruiting rankings (Berkowitz, 2013). Since the media has a strong interest in college football recruiting, recruiting and roster management strategies like over-signing receive a great deal of attention.

### **Media Coverage of Over-Signing**

Where some might believe that over-signing affords the nation's elite teams a competitive edge, Felder (2012) opposes that belief by stating that one only needs to look at the transfer numbers, dismissals, and non-qualifiers experienced by powerful programs over the last several years to know that over-signing is not the reason for the dominance of elite American football programs. Not including graduate student transfers, almost five percent of college football players transfer every season, which is 18 percent greater than the rate of the overall athlete population; only college basketball is worse (Auerbach & Prisbell, 2012). Bachman (2011) disagrees with Felder and writes that over-signing helps teams by giving them more options. She argues that over-signing has allowed schools to gain an unfair competitive advantage against other programs.

Though competitive balance is not an issue that typically comes to mind when discussing over-signing, the views of those currently coaching against teams that over-sign would indicate that there should be more dialogue about this issue, especially between NCAA conferences. In order to argue that over-signing presents schools with a competitive advantage, a case must be made that schools that do not over-sign are left at a disadvantage (Gordon, 2011). Such a concern was expressed by former Louisiana State University (LSU) and Indiana University (IU) head football coach Gerry DiNardo. When discussing recruiting at a school in the Big Ten, DiNardo talked about how different and disadvantaged he felt saying, “At LSU, I could do whatever I wanted. The athletic director trusted me. If I signed 30, he knew I would be at 25 when I had to be. There was always a way to manage the numbers” (Gordon, 2011, para 6). Later in 2002, when Indiana hired DiNardo, he had to adhere to the recruiting rules of the Big Ten, which has the most restrictive rules against over-signing. Conversely, in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), Ole Miss signed a 37-player recruiting class in 2009. When asked about the excessive number by the media, then head football coach Houston Nutt responded with, “There's no rule that says that we can't sign 80, all I know is we have to have 25 ready to go in August” (Staples, 2009, para 2). This has led many sport journalists and fans to believe that “the over-signing rules are not worth the paper they are printed on” (Staples, 2011b, para 5).

### **Examples of Over-Signing in College Football**

Doyel (2010) has previously written about players who were affected by over-signing. He mentioned how former LSU head football coach Les Miles withdrew scholarship offers from three different players, one of them being Elliott Porter. Porter signed with LSU in February of 2010, qualified academically, and participated in summer classes. After two months as a member of the LSU football team, Porter learned that he was going to be losing his scholarship (Doyel, 2010). LSU had surpassed the 25 incoming counter limit, which meant that someone had to go. He commented that “I have to win a waiver, but it shouldn't be a problem. It's unfair how they told me at the last minute” (Hinton, 2010, para 3). Fortunately, Porter eventually won an appeal at LSU and was able to transfer to Kentucky, though he returned to LSU one year later. Another example of over-signing occurred at Miami when former head football coach Randy Shannon cut senior defensive end Steven Wesley, a fifth-year senior who had redshirted as a freshman at the coaching staff's request to sign more recruits (Doyel, 2010). The media's coverage of both stories helped perpetuate the notion that over-signing is immoral and that it hurts athletes.

Towers (2011) discussed how high school recruit Lorenzo Mauldin was hurt by the process of over-signing. Mauldin accepted a scholarship offer from the South Carolina Gamecocks in July of 2010 and stuck to his commitment throughout the school year, deciding against taking official visits to other programs. Unfortunately, Mauldin did not sign with South Carolina as expected, finding out via a fax to his school the day before National Signing Day that the Gamecocks recruiting class had filled up. South Carolina had concerns about Mauldin being able to qualify academically, so they moved on without him. Although this is a common practice, it is important to note that many of the other prospects that South Carolina signed were facing the same academic issues as Mauldin. Another former South Carolina committee, linebacker Jordan Montgomery, was also affected negatively by over-signing. His high school coach claimed that South Carolina waited “until 18 hours before signing day, and if they say anything

else, they're lying" (Karp & Everson, 2011, para 21) to tell Montgomery that they did not have room for him in their class.

More recent examples of players affected by over-signing were reported at the University of Michigan. Two players, Rashad Weaver and Erik Swenson, were treated negatively by the program, which was attempting to over-sign their recruiting class (Solomon, 2016). Rashad Weaver said he "felt used" by the staff after committing to the program the previous summer and then receiving no attention from Michigan for seven months. Swenson had been committed to Michigan for almost three years when Michigan pulled his offer less than a month from signing day. Sport and business writer John Bacon weighed in on the situation by stating "Michigan should have communicated better with the recruits to minimize the damage, the hard feelings, and the bad PR" (Solomon, 2016, para 18).

### **Governing Body Oversight**

In 2010, an antitrust investigation into the NCAA rules that make scholarships renewable by schools on a yearly basis was conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) (Whiteside, 2011); the DOJ did not file a lawsuit, but legal cases were produced from their investigation. Additionally, California passed legislation that was backed by the National College Players Association (NCPA), which requires recruiters to provide a written summary of their schools' policies on renewing one-year athletic scholarships and the amount of expenses not covered by those scholarships (Whiteside, 2011). Ramogi Huma, President of the NCPA, says, "part of the problem is rooted in the one-year cap on scholarships." Huma believes that, "if we're able to get that cap eliminated, then schools won't have the flexibility to over-sign and run players off. Now, players can basically get fired for any reason" (Whiteside, 2011, para 18). As an answer to the criticism associated with one-year scholarship offers, the NCAA agreed to allow institutions to offer multi-year scholarships to collegiate athletes (Hosick, 2012). Unfortunately, in the years following the approval of that legislation, many schools have chosen to continue offering one-year renewable scholarships rather than four-year athletic scholarships (Solomon, 2014).

Since collegiate athletes are individuals that possess lower levels of power and status, they are likely to suffer in situations where the standards of justice reflect inequity (Sartore-Baldwin & Warner, 2012). College athletes need oversight and rules/regulations that will protect them. One such law that is designed to protect college athletes is The Student Athlete Right to Know Act, which requires the athletic departments of colleges and universities to be more transparent in the recruiting process (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004). Programs are required to post important information concerning their recruiting and scholarship policies on the college and/or university's athletic website. One purpose of this law is to educate collegiate athletes on the questions that they need to ask recruiters and the information they need before accepting a scholarship offer.

Unfortunately, in regard to oversight from collegiate governing bodies, athletes receive little help from the NCAA and the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA). Fondren (2010) wrote that the NCAA is more concerned with what coaches *do* (e.g., economic compensation, contact violations, recruiting violations) rather than what coaches *say* to prospects. Additionally, Byers (1995) once remarked that the NCAA is reluctant to punish

member institutions for recruiting violations. Similarly, the AFCA is also not active in curtailing the actions of its member coaches from misleading recruits as evidenced by the fact that they have rarely suspended one of their members for knowingly lying to or misleading prospective athletes (Barnhart, 2003).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Though it can be considered unethical or immoral to over-sign and put a young adult in such a position, the practice of over-signing in college football is pervasive (Staples, 2011a). As such, it is the aim of this study to determine why a coach and his staff would continue to engage in this practice. This study used interviews and completed questionnaires to determine what factors influence or motivate a coach to over-sign a recruiting class, how coaches perceive over-signing will impact the players involved, and what systemic changes coaches think would prevent over-signing from hurting players during the recruitment process while still remaining competitive. This study is also compelling because little empirical research has been done regarding the issue of over-signing, thus much of the discourse surrounding over-signing focuses on comments made by those in the media rather than considering the viewpoint of college football coaches. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: What do coaches and support staff members say motivates them to engage in over-signing?

RQ2: To what extent are coaches and support staff members concerned with how their actions might affect players?

RQ3: What changes do coaches and support staff members feel should be made to improve the current college football recruiting system?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Grounded theory is a methodology formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) where the participants and their words form the hypotheses and concepts that are discussed. Grounded theory is comprised of “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that less of an emphasis should be placed upon verifying and testing concepts/existing theories. Instead the focus should be on discovering new concepts that are within the data. In grounded theory, data create the theory that is then used to analyze the data. The data from the study “form the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). This approach to research emphasizes and values developing theories based on the data rather than deducing hypotheses based on existing theories. This approach rejects using existing theories solely because they currently exist (Charmaz, 2006; Richardson, 1999).

This approach is beneficial when examining an area that has not been researched and when researchers want to allow the data to speak for itself. In the context of this study, over-signing is an area that has not been researched and thus, grounded theory represents the ideal methodological approach to studying this practice.

## Method

To answer the primary research questions, a total of 17 college football coaches and professional staffers from nine of the FBS conferences took part in this study. Coaches and professional staffers working at the FBS level were selected as participants based on the ability to find participants, that FBS staffs are typically quite large, and the fact that most of the commentary around over-signing occurs at the FBS level. Additionally, since recruiting is a group effort, and many programs have staff specifically tasked with recruiting, our study included professional staffers who were actively engaged in the recruitment process (e.g., planned recruiting visits, spoke with recruits, and developed recruiting boards with coaches) as well as the coaches. The coaches and professional staffers in this study were coded prior to analysis to keep their responses confidential. Since there were 17 participants, a code value rather than a pseudonym name was attached to each participant coach or professional staffer (e.g., CPS101).

### Data Collection

Emails were sent to coaches and administrators at 89 of the 128 FBS schools; the remaining 39 schools were not involved because they either do not make the email addresses for their coaches and administrators available online, their email system rejects domain names not affiliated with that university, or because the team was undergoing a coaching change and had yet to update their staff directory. A total of 17 coaches and professional staffers responded to the initial email and indicated they would be willing to take part in this study. The sample included either a coach and/or professional staffer working in every FBS conference except the Southeastern Conference (SEC).

An interview guide (see Appendix A) was created for use in this study, which allowed for semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interview guide was created through consultation with academics who had previously conducted qualitative work, incorporated key issues highlighted by sport journalists covering the topic, and was based on suggestions provided by individuals who were current or previous college football coaches and professional staffers.

After contact was made with participants, interviews were scheduled. Since participants were scattered across the country, interviews were conducted over the phone. The preferred method for data collection was to conduct interviews so that it would allow participants to share their experiences in college football recruiting in their own words (Markula & Silk, 2011). Some of the participants were unable to be interviewed because of their work schedules (i.e., data were collected towards the end of the college football season and at the height of the recruiting push to National Signing Day), but they still wanted to add their voices to the discussion, so the research team decided to let them provide open-ended responses to the questionnaire. Overall, 11 participants were interviewed via the phone while the other 6 participants submitted open-ended responses to the questionnaire (see Appendix A). Through the collection of audio interviews and written responses, participants were able to express their perspectives on over-signing in rich detail. Participants that completed the written questionnaire/interview guide emailed their responses to the research team. Furthermore, they answered any follow-up questions (e.g.,

clarification on a statement, elaboration of a point made in a written response, comment on another related point, etc.) that were emailed to them.

### **Data Analysis**

The questions that the respondents addressed required extensive answers in order to adequately respond to each question, which is why a qualitative method was chosen for this study. Data were analyzed using Patton's (1990) approach, which starts with a verbatim transcription of each interview. Following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) guidelines, data were organized and coded in multiple stages. Initially the primary investigator used incident-by-incident coding to break the data into smaller pieces. Then, several categories were developed from the initial open codes. Identifying themes within each transcript allowed the researcher to gain insight into what the practice of over-signing meant to each participant. Once themes were identified within each interview, an analysis took place comparing and contrasting each participant's themes with those themes of the other participants and links were made between the categories (i.e., axial coding). The researcher wrote extensive memos throughout the analytic process. Constant comparison methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were applied to create, recreate, and refine the themes. To cross-check the analysis, the primary researcher consulted an experienced qualitative researcher to discuss the identified codes and themes.

Furthermore, Tracy's (2010) eight criteria (i.e., worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence) of quality in qualitative work were followed throughout the design process and interpretation process. In alignment with Tracy's (2010) criteria, a) the topic of this paper focused on an issue that has yet to be empirically addressed through scientific research, b) the sincerity of the participants allowed the research team to develop credible themes that help to explain the existence of and continued perpetuation of over-signing, c) the 17 participants offered rich and detailed information that was then analyzed to address the research questions, and d) the resultant themes provide an understanding of over-signing that informs future academic research, in addition to athletic administrators, coaches, and athletes.

### **Results**

Conversations with college football coaches and professional staffers provided a rich description into what the recruiting process is like and why over-signing is used in recruiting and roster management practices. These conversations revealed that over-signing is generally viewed as an accepted practice that offers teams the ability to account for college athlete attrition rates and indecisive recruits, as well as improve their chances of winning games (RQ1). Additionally, participants viewed over-signing as a way of ridding their roster of underperforming or malcontent players while also being able to secure commitments from recruits that they did not expect. Stated another way, over-signing is a part of roster management (RQ2). Finally, participants discussed how an early signing period would help curtail the negative aspects of over-signing and improve the current recruitment system (RQ3).



### Accepted Practice

Several participants viewed over-signing as an accepted practice. CPS116, the director of operations for a program in the Sun Belt Conference, believes that over-signing must occur because of the way the recruiting calendar falls:

When you really look at it, National Signing Day occurs before a player has finished meeting the NCAA's requirements for admission. Since a lot of kids stay on the bubble for a while, over-signing is a necessary evil because it allows for us to guarantee that we are bringing in all the guys that we want rather than hope that everyone comes out eligible. That would be ideal, but it doesn't always happen.

His argument is that the NCAA wants teams to sign players to a binding contract (NLI) without knowing for sure whether they will be eligible. From a coach's perspective, that is a risky situation to navigate.

According to CPS114, an assistant director of football operations at a school in the American Athletic Conference, when coaching staffs discuss over-signing, their discussions are very direct:

The conversations are mostly based on what is the maximum we can sign, and how many we can actually bring in. You might be able to sign 25, but if you only have 19 spots available that is the number we go with. Then as recruiting unfolds, it might get bumped up by 1 or 2 based on academics or if we don't think a commitment will be eligible then we will add another signee.

In the case of his institution, over-signing a recruiting class only occurs if they *think* a player will be ineligible. Unfortunately, that over-signed player may find himself without a scholarship if the original player that team targeted becomes eligible.

In addition to compensating for eligibility concerns, over-signing is also viewed as an acceptable way for teams to deal with player discipline or academic issues. CPS104, a position coach at a school in the Mid-American Conference, commented on how over-signing protects schools that might lose a player due to poor academic performance, a career ending injury, or for disciplinary reasons:

I think that you have to over-sign for a number of reasons. Now you need to be prudent and have a plan of how you're going to deal with the over-signing and the kids in your class...If you have a guy in your program that is facing a major discipline issue, is potentially going to flunk out of school, or is facing some serious injury recovery than by all means you need to over-sign. You have to protect yourself from kids getting hurt, dropping out of school, or God forbid, discipline issues.

Finally, it can be argued that over-signing is an acceptable practice because the NCAA allows for it to occur, even if it is just to 28 counters. According to CPS111, a director of player personnel

for a Big Ten program, if the NCAA really cared they would stress academics and graduation numbers.

Programs shouldn't cover attrition through over-signing. If you lose guys, then you'll have a few less scholarship players that season. But if retention is not that big of a deal, I don't see what it hurts. Early enrollees and the ability to count scholarships "back" is basically asking programs to over sign. So, until that legislation is changed, the practice won't change.

His comments speak to his belief that the NCAA's focus should be on retention and having player's graduate. Coaches cannot stop a player from entering the draft early, but they can help prevent a player from becoming academically ineligible.

### **College Athlete Attrition Rates**

Of the 17 coaches and professional staffers that were interviewed, many (n=13) cited the need to over-sign to account for attrition (e.g., injured athletes may quit or do not return for a season). In addition to the physical demands of football, the sport has a high transfer rate amongst its athletes, which can also account for attrition (Johnson, 2011). For CPS110, an assistant director of football operations at a mid-major program, the practice of over-signing is a necessity:

We need to over-sign in some sort of way to keep up with any kind of attrition either from graduation, players deciding to turn pro early, increased transfer issues, or seeing a player's eligibility expire. Additionally, we have to account for the fact that a couple of our signees might not qualify academically.

CPS110's comment echoed a reoccurring point that six participants expressed that equates the over-signing process to a necessary evil. In some situations, a coaching staff might over-sign because they have the additional NLI's and, although they are returning more than 60 players on scholarship, it just makes sense for them to protect themselves and their program. CPS105, a position coach and personnel professional at a mid-major program, stated as much when he discussed his reasoning behind over-signing. He said, "You might over-sign because you have more NLI's or initials available than vacated scholarships [from graduated seniors or transfers] and you want to cover for the natural rate of attrition." Anticipating attrition is something that coaches must prepare for, whereas the media may lack that level of insight. Coaches have the best understanding of what their roster will look like on a year-to-year basis.

The natural rate of attrition that CPS105 mentioned above is traditionally looked at as players transferring out of a program or deciding to leave early (Felder, 2012). Because player transfers have become common practice in college football, many teams will over-sign their recruiting classes in anticipation of the end of the season exodus of discontented players.

When asked to discuss how he viewed the recruiting process, CPS101, a recruiting coordinator in the Big 12, focused most of his answer on the topic of player transfers:

I see the recruiting practice as long and tiresome. It's probably way too saturated to be quite honest. I think there is just way too much attention given to it. I think that is why you see transfers. You see more transfers now than you did 10 years ago, and I think it's in part because of all the attention these kids get in high school.

His view places the issue of over-signing on the shoulders of athletes. The fact that college football recruiting has become so popular has potentially led to a group of incoming players that expect immediate playing time; if not they might opt to transfer and see what other opportunities exist. In such cases, the coaches now must find athletes to replace those departed players. Rather than wait until a player decides to transfer, coaches preemptively over-sign.

Although most coaches spoke about attrition as inevitable, a few of the coaches spoke about ways to prevent attrition. CPS102, a position coach and personnel professional at a mid-major program, discussed how running a program the "right way" and recruiting the "right fits" for a program can help prevent the need to annually over-sign. Of course, he acknowledged that it will happen occasionally, and for a variety of reasons:

...transfers happen and attrition happens – kids decide that they want to be closer to home, your program or school is not a good fit for them, or they are having trouble with their academics – those things all happen. If you're routinely signing 28-32 kids, it does not send a great message to the class of kids that you are recruiting now. I'm sure there are exceptions to what I'm talking about. Maybe a coach takes a new job and a bunch of players transfer, so they have more than 25 spots. But I think in general if you're signing those kinds of numbers year-in-and-year-out that something is not going right.

Essentially, he argues that appropriate roster management is a proactive way to avoid attrition.

### **Indecisive Recruits**

Although much of the blame for over-signing gets placed on coaches, there might be reason to attribute some blame to college players and the current recruiting system. In today's recruiting world, prospects change their minds frequently (Johnson, 2011). CPS115, an assistant director of football operations at a Conference USA program, mentioned the frailty of a recruit's verbal commitment when discussing the recruiting process. He stated that, "From an administrator's perspective, the recruiting process is a long and stressful process. It's a drawn-out time where you are concerned about the actions of young people who could change their minds moment-to-moment." Athletes can change their minds and, in some cases, may commit to multiple schools in a recruiting cycle (Hamilton, 2016).

Even if a coaching staff wants to have integrity and not over-sign their recruiting class/roster, they might feel pressured to do so to account for the fact that high school seniors and junior college players have difficulty following through on their verbal commitments.

The fact that recruits can be indecisive and reluctant to commit to schools is an opinion that CPS104, a position coach at a school in the Mid-American Conference, discussed during his interview:

The biggest part of recruiting is hitting your numbers. For example, we need three of these, we need two of those, etc. If you need to bring in three offensive linemen and you only get one then that is going to come back and bite you in the ass in two years. I don't understand how kids can commit their sophomore year and then de-commit a month before the letter of intent. The problem is that it's rampant. It's almost like the kid is challenging himself to see how many times he can de-commit.

Teams are negatively impacted if they need a specific player who de-commits and coaches must scramble to find someone else to play that position. Since roster composition is greatly impacted by the decisions of recruits, some coaches have chosen to over-sign to minimize the potential impact of a de-commitment.

### **Winning Advantage**

Football is a business where winning is required to maintain employment (Huguenin, 2011). Since the coaching profession has a high turnover rate, coaches might feel pressure to over-sign. When discussing over-signing, CA102, a position coach and personnel professional at a mid-major program, mentioned job security and the nature of the results-based business:

...sometimes over-signing is done out of desperation. The mindset is that we have to win this year so even though it might not look great if we over-sign, we have to because we need to get as many impact guys as we can get. This isn't great for the collegiate athletes, but it's a reality of the industry.

Essentially, he is justifying the process of over-signing with all the other tactics that coaches use to make sure that they put their programs in the best position to succeed. Byers (1995) wrote that superior performance is the aim of college sports; university presidents will fire a coach who cannot deliver and hire someone who can. CA102 compared the over-signing process to a disease, which speaks to the state of recruiting tactics and his overall opinion of this issue:

I think that over-signing is a symptom of a much larger disease, which is dishonesty in recruiting. It's really hard to fill out a roster or recruiting class while letting kids know where they stand at all times. Most kids want to hear that they are your most sought after prospect. I think that over-signing tends to occur when you tell a bunch of folks that "we want you, we want you" and then more folks commit than you originally intended.

His statement speaks to the fact that over-signing is not the main issue, but is a symptom of the disease of dishonesty in recruiting. Coaches, possibly reluctantly so, continue to engage in dishonest recruiting practices because of the potential to gain a competitive advantage and maintain employment.

## Roster Management

One of the potential advantages of over-signing is that it can be used to gain a competitive advantage or edge for the schools that over-sign (Bachman, 2011; Felder, 2012). The participants in this study all stated in some way, that even if they did not over-sign because they were trying to protect the kids, that over-signing can be a great way to get ahead. While discussing why teams over-sign, CPS108, a position coach in the Big Ten, mentioned how a staff can use it to force out underperforming players. He said, “I think that some schools use over-signing as a way to force out players that don’t fit the program or aren’t as talented as they were believed to be.” CPS114, an assistant director of football operations for a program in the American Athletic Conference, is one participant that greatly supported the use of over-signing for adding new young talent while forcing out current players on the roster that have underperformed:

For current players, if they are being cut to make room for new players then they probably weren’t thought of very highly by the coaching staff and should want to move on anyway. They had a shot to prove themselves and it didn’t pan out. I don’t feel as bad for them as I do for an incoming player getting blindsided.

Players need to show results on the field or they risk being replaced. Coaches want players to earn their scholarship and if they find that a player’s performance is underwhelming, they can readily over-sign and bring in a replacement.

CPS105, a position coach and personnel professional for a Mid-American Conference program, briefly described recruiting culture. He said, “The recruiting process is a constant and tireless ‘Arms Race’ that is ever evolving as staffs continue to find innovative ways to sell their program and compile what is the lifeblood of any program – their collegiate athletes.” Acquiring talent in recruiting is important, but acquiring elite level talent is more important. During CPS105’s interview, he discussed how the pursuit of elite level talent serves as the biggest reason for why teams over-sign:

A team might over-sign if they find a great player who becomes available – maybe he was let out of a prior commitment, he de-committed from somebody else, or his game tape just recently came to the coach’s attention – which they think can really help them. Another reason that a team might over-sign would be if they found a player that they thought was great and wanted to commit to them despite the fact that they have already filled all their commitments in the upcoming recruiting class.

If a coach finds an elite player that is willing to join his football program, he is likely to try his best to figure out a way to have him on the team. That player’s addition might mean that they have too many counters and as a result, someone else will be released from their NLI.

Over-signing can also be used to weaken a competitor even if it does not necessarily help the program that is over-signing. Sometimes, over-signing occurs because coaches are trying to keep talent away from their competitors. While discussing over-signing, CA114, an assistant

director of football operations at a school in the American Athletic Conference, made a point of connecting over-signing to this idea:

Over-signing is usually done in two circumstances: The first is if you know that you are recruiting a kid that won't qualify (which I think means that you shouldn't be signing him in the first place). The second reason is greed (you are signing him simply so he doesn't sign with your competitors).

Over-signing affords coaches the opportunity to bring in talent while simultaneously keeping talent away from other competitors, which is why it is sometimes practiced in the first place. Some participants referred to it as "stacking the deck" (personal correspondence with CPS101, January 20, 2014) in their favor.

### **Possible Solution: Early Signing Day**

Twelve of the participants discussed how a possible early signing day would help to curtail over-signing and improve the recruiting process. Most coaches indicated that the recruiting process is long, tiresome, and overwhelming at times. Both the length of time coaches spend recruiting players starting as early as high school and the indecisiveness of recruits plays a vital role in perpetuating this long, tiresome, and overwhelming process. CPS112, a recruiting assistant in the Big Ten, believes that the process begins too early and needs to change. He said, "I do not believe that we should be contacting sophomores and juniors in high school. It starts to complicate the process too soon." His view aligned with prior statements made by CPS104, a position coach in the Mid-American Conference, who said, "Collegiate athletes are too fickle in their decision-making." One way to possibly avoid having an issue with recruits continuously changing their minds might be to delay the start of the relationship – building process with these recruits (i.e., wait until the June before their senior year of high school) (Donohue, 2014).

CPS101, a recruiting coordinator in the Big 12, addressed the topic of indecisive recruits and how he believes that there should be an early signing day, preferably in early December. The possibility of allowing recruits to make an early commitment after a summer/early fall official visit seems to be a better solution because it would allow coaches and players to receive earlier closure from a typically stressful process:

I think I speak for the majority when I say that there needs to be an early national letter signing period. I think that would be good, whether it's in August or December. The problem is that if you make it in August then people are going to say that you should be able to bring kids on official visits earlier which people will say expedites the process which I could see causing real issues. Then you'd be hosting kids on official visits 30 weeks out of the year, which is not what you want to do. If there was one on December 1<sup>st</sup>, I do not think that would be a terrible thing because a lot of times these kids commit to schools without ever visiting because that is where they want to go and they should be able to end the process early if they want because it can be overwhelming.

His plan would allow for students to sign early if they just wanted to be done with the process. For coaches, this plan would work nicely because it would allow them to fill needs in the late

summer or early winter. In addition, it protects players against over-signing if they already signed their NLI.

CPS102 echoed this viewpoint. He believes that an early signing period would allow coaches to focus on a smaller number of recruits necessary to round out their class once they received initial commitments:

I think that there should be an early signing period. One way to combat over-signing would be to have an early signing period. A lot of kids now try to make the decision before their senior year, so why not let them sign those last two weeks in July. That way they can have the process done. This will also make it so that during the season you won't be trying to sign 40 guys for 25 spots because maybe you received 18 commitments in July so now you're only recruiting 15 kids for 7 spots.

If the point of over-signing is for coaches to be able to get their desired numbers, then maybe an early signing period would allow coaches to get their numbers without having to over-sign.

Of course, one issue that coaches worry about is whether their incoming players will be academically eligible. At present, one reason that coaches over-sign is because they fear that a student might not meet the NCAA's academic standards come August. Thus, a real question exists regarding whether or not an early signing period would really change the recruiting actions of coaches that over-sign. Some participants in this study mentioned this issue. CPS 117, a defensive coordinator for a PAC-12 program, talked about the importance of finishing high school so prospects could be physically and academically ready for college:

I believe prospects should be allowed to take official visits earlier than the start of their senior year. The recruiting process happens earlier and decisions are made earlier and faster, so they should have the opportunity to take official visits earlier. I don't agree with early enrollment. Prospects should finish their senior year of high school. The NCAA should require 8 semesters of high school (or the equivalent). Kids are starting college early, often unprepared both physically and mentally. I also do not agree with an early signing period. The February letter of intent does not need to change. It has worked for years and is still the best time for kids to sign. If academics are a priority, prospective collegiate athletes need to have time to apply to schools and to finish their academic preparation in the classroom before signing a letter of intent.

His view seems to indicate that high school athletes should not be encouraged to end the process quickly, but rather take their visits, enjoy the experience, and continue to grow on the field and in the classroom.

### **Discussion**

After analyzing the participants' responses, both in terms of looking at their answers and the emergent themes, three main areas of discussion surfaced. These observations are threefold: a) over-signing in college football might be a necessary evil, b) coaches are under pressure to win immediately, and c) no preventative measures or punishments are in place to curtail the act of over-signing.

### **Over-Signing as a Necessary Evil**

Attrition commonly occurs on a football team through many ways, such as losing players early to the NFL draft, players deciding to transfer, loss of eligibility due to academic issues, or career-ending injuries. Whether it is because the athlete feels he should be playing more, thinks a different coaching scheme would better suit his talents, or is about to graduate and can still use his remaining eligibility elsewhere, players are transferring out of programs now more than they have in the last decade (personal correspondence with CPS101, January 20, 2014). Though career ending injuries do happen, the participants in this study focused more on player transfers and academic issues as a reason to over-sign. The time demands associated with participation in collegiate athletics, combined with the fact that collegiate athletes traditionally have lower academic achievement scores than their non-athlete counterparts, and/or do not value their education as strongly as they should (Eitzen, 2015), viably catalyzes the over-signing process. The recruitment of underqualified college athletes can lead to academic scandals (Smith & Willingham, 2015), academic clustering (Paule-Koba, 2014), and disparities in graduation rates of athletes of color (Southall, Nagel, Wallace, & Sexton, 2016). In an effort to avoid those academic issues, over-signing allows coaches to target multiple prospects in the hopes that they can sign the best athletes and students in a recruiting class. If a coach fears a player or a group of players will not qualify academically, they can recruit backup or alternative options, just in case their fears become actualized.

Respondents also mentioned how often recruits tend to change their college choice during the recruitment process as a concern. The media has previously chastised coaches when they pull scholarships from players and/or over-sign, but they fail to recognize that coaches are engaged in a process that relies on the words of indecisive high school teenagers. Additionally, recruits that back out of a verbal commitment are rarely chastised for their decision to revisit their options. Although these recruits are young adults, they still could arguably be held more accountable to their verbal commitments. Many coaches shared the mindset that if a player is uncertain, then he should not be committing. The reality that many coaches face is that they cannot always rely on a prospect's word.

### **Coaches Feel Pressure to Win Now**

College football is a multi-million-dollar business that generates a significant amount of publicity for schools, which benefits football coaches because it helps administrators view their sport as a priority. Football can provide advertising for a university, increase applications and enrollment, and increase donations/state appropriations, which means having a successful football team can be highly beneficial for universities (Dosh, 2013). The coaching profession can be very lucrative in terms of financial compensation and national fame, but it is also constantly experiencing turnover. Since the 2000 season, there have been 238 coaching changes at the FBS level, meaning an average of almost two per school among the now 128 FBS programs (Huguenin, 2011). Since coaches face intense pressure to win, and to win consistently, coaches might utilize over-signing to meet their high expectations as it provides them with opportunities to bring in new talent. Stated another way, over-signing can serve as a way to "have more cards in the deck" (personal correspondence with CPS101, January 20, 2014). Essentially, coaching



college football is a demanding profession and coaches can use a practice like over-signing in positive ways to give their program a variety of roster management options.

Since coaches are under a great deal of pressure to win, they may not be as athlete-focused as they should be. Our participants' attitudes towards the recruits they over-sign reflect their opinions towards kids not being able to go to college and current players' abilities to improve. Comments from the participants that used language like "protecting yourself", "not great for the player, but a reality of the industry", "the player(s) should want to leave if the new coaching staff does not value them", and "the need to keep players from competitors", suggest that some coaching staffs do not consider how over-signing may impact their players. Coaches greatly influence college athletes' sense of agency, so the calloused and blind attitudes conveyed by some participants illustrate one of many ways athletes are used and abused. Not only do coaches act with impunity, they even sometimes receive bonuses for this type of attitude and behavior. Their inability to consider the athlete's perspective, an important gap in their thinking, is one of the more notable takeaways from this study. Over-signing is a complex recruiting and roster management practice, and just as sport journalists are frequently guilty of focusing too much on the athlete's perspective and ignoring the coaching perspective, coaches are guilty of focusing too much on their own interests and ignoring the impact that over-signing may have on players.

Fans and sport journalists should consider coaching transitions and the pressure that coaches are put under when discussing over-signing. When a new coach enters a program, he is likely to bring in players that fit his offensive or defensive schemes, and will try to get rid of those that do not. Is that any different than a business that undergoes a change in management? Over-signing can be used to overhaul a roster with players that fit the direction in which the new team is heading. Players on the current roster may lose their spot on the team, be compelled/encouraged to transfer, or serve as walk-ons for a coach to configure the roster he would like. If a coach chooses not to over-sign his roster but then has a poor season, fans and the media will not applaud him for his restraint.

### **Lack of Preventative/Punitive Measures**

CPS102 was asked if he believed that over-signing should be prevented and if the NCAA does enough in terms of oversight and punishment to prevent over-signing. He responded with a discussion of the poor enforcement procedures that are currently in place:

Okay, I guess I will try to say this as politically correct as I can. I do not think that we should have rules if we are not planning to enforce them. If the rule is going to be that you can only sign up to 25 in a class than let's enforce it. If we're not going to enforce it – and it sure seems like we do not – then let's not have the rule...Over-signing is a rule that people know about and can see if you commit, but there does not seem to be any punishment handed out to those coaches. You know what I mean? Which is really silly to me...I don't understand that.

Regardless of whether a coach or administrator is in favor of over-signing, an issue exists because the practice is illegal per the NCAA, but no punishment is handed out to coaches that

commit the act. The fact that punishment does not exist is even more puzzling given that over-signing is a publicly observable act.

The NCAA does have the power to help further prevent over-signing. Two solutions that emerged from this study for curtailing the detrimental effects of over-signing would be to change the signing date and/or establish an early signing day. The current recruiting calendar is set up so that players are being asked to commit to schools in February (the soonest they can sign a NLI). Coaches are left hoping students pass the entrance requirements in March or early April, which may be more difficult at institutions with higher admissions requirements, which has led to some debate (Hinnen, 2014). If schools had more time to wait on those kids to qualify, they would not have to sign their back-up plan player(s) as well. Several participants mentioned that the current recruiting calendar is an issue. Furthermore, having an early signing day was also discussed as a solution for fixing over-signing. An early signing day would give prospects the ability to end their recruitment early, which would subsequently alleviate any concerns a coaching staff might have that a player may change his mind. Coaches would then be able to focus on filling the remaining spots in their recruiting class rather than continuing to stress about possible issues that may occur on National Signing Day. Although an early signing day may present issues for those institutions that have higher academic standards, the majority of the participants in this study view the possible adoption of an early signing day as a positive. Thus, an early signing period may be good for some, but not all programs.

### **Conclusion**

Every participant in this study provided more than one reason for why a coach might over-sign a recruiting class/roster, which shows that over-signing is a complex process. As CPS 103 said, "If you over-sign, then you obviously know something about your team that the general public does not know." While over-signing has the potential to negatively impact players, it is not a certainty that all over-signing is evil and that every team that over-signs hurts players. Over-signing is a complex recruiting and roster management practice that has received a great deal of attention from sport journalists. The lack of research examining this practice has allowed for the opinions of sport journalists to shape the narrative on over-signing. Athletic administrators, fans, and sport journalists should consider over-signing from a coach's perspective before chastising the practice. This study, the first of its kind, gave college football coaches and personnel an opportunity to share their perspective as insiders. Rather than furthering the narrative that over-signing harms college athletes, is a dishonest recruiting and roster management practice, and is used to gain a competitive advantage, these participants provided unique insight into recruiting collegiate athletes. Among the significant findings of this study are several new developments not discussed by the general media when discussing over-signing, including continued references to the college athlete attrition rates experienced by college football teams, the indecisiveness of recruits, a discussion of how football is a sport that demands instant success from its coaches, and the realization that enforcement against over-signing does not exist.

Coaches recruit prospective college athletes that may not qualify academically to attend their institution, so over-signing helps protect them in the event a player fails to qualify. The coaching profession has constant turnover, which means coaches inherit rosters that may not

include the players they need to be successful. Thus, a coach can over-sign his roster to add the types of players he needs to execute the coaching schemes that will be incorporated. Our findings indicate that change is needed to protect both the coaches and players from issues that can arise in the recruiting process. Reforming college football recruiting has the potential to solve many of the current athletic problems that exists in higher education. Scholars and sport practitioners should work together to determine: a) what system would work best for coaches, b) how players can be protected, and c) what can be done to ensure that prospective college athletes are ready to excel academically once they arrive on campus.

### **Limitations**

The participants featured in this study represent a diversity of coaches and professional staffers from conferences across the nation. Unfortunately, none of the participants were from the SEC, which is the most discussed conference when addressing the issue of over-signing in college football. Another limitation of this study is that some of the coaches were only able to participate through a completed email submission of the interview guide. However, they did so because they wanted to be part of the study but had time commitments that hindered their ability to pick an interview day and time. Although those participants were not interviewed, their emailed interview guide submissions still represented their views on over-signing and they were all willing to answer follow-up questions. Lastly, an additional limitation of this study is the fact that the primary researcher served as the single coder, albeit under the supervision of an experienced qualitative researcher.

### **Future Research**

Future research should focus on obtaining interviews from coaches or professional staffers in the SEC. Additionally, continued efforts should be made to determine what changes to the current recruiting system would benefit both coaches and current/prospective collegiate athletes. Furthermore, a discussion of the efficacy of an early signing date (e.g., who benefits, who is hurt, etc.) should take place. Finally, future scholars should consider conducting focus groups with coaches and professional staffers to discuss this issue. Focus groups represent another qualitative approach that researchers can use to obtain rich data that can be analyzed to address this topic.

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Appendix A

<b>Coaches Code:</b>   
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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **College Football Over-Signing Interview Guide**

- 1) How long have you been involved in recruiting/coaching college football?
- 2) What is the largest recruiting class you have ever been part of? Was there anything special about that class that contributed to it being so large?
- 3) How do you view the recruiting process?
- 4) What is your opinion regarding the practice of over-signing in college football?
- 5) Is over-signing a discussed topic amongst the coaching staffs you've been part of? If yes, can you describe these conversations?
- 6) From your experience, what seems to be the consensus view of coaches towards the practice of over-signing?
- 7) Why do you believe that certain coaching staffs over-sign?
- 8) Why do you believe that certain coaching staffs do not over-sign?
- 9) What impact do you believe over-signing has on players (address both current and prospective)?
- 10) If your program has ever over-signed, what factors were considered in determining what players to not extend scholarships to? (i.e. player disposition, academic standing, positional depth, etc.)
- 11) Do you have any examples – personal or that you've read – involving athletes being harmed by over-signing?
- 12) Do you believe over-signing should be prevented? If yes, do you believe that the NCAA does enough to prevent over-signing?
- 13) Do you believe that the recruiting process should be changed? If so, how?