

# Getting In: College Choice for Pacific Islander High School Football Players



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## Introduction

Pacific Islander (PI) communities are underrepresented in US higher education, and hold bachelor's degrees at rates lower than the national rate (US Census 2012). Empowering Pacific Island Communities (EPIC and Asian Americans Advancing Justice 2014) reported that Guamanians (13%), Samoans (11%), Tongans (11%), Fijians (10%), and Micronesians (4%) all hold bachelor's degrees at less than half the rate of the national population of the United States (28%). As college tuitions continue to rise (Mumper and Freeman 2005; Schoen 2015), and meritocratic aid (Perna and Titus 2004) replaces need-based aid, there is the possibility that PI participation in higher education may be hampered even further. This research on 'college choice' for PIs entering college athletics is an attempt to study alternative pathways to higher education. This research should inform policymakers, staff, faculty and administrators about the goals and expectations that PI student-athletes bring with them to college, in order to better serve and support this population.

If US higher education is to become more inclusive towards PI communities, the institution itself (i.e. policymakers, faculty and administration), PI high school football recruits, their families, community outreach organisations, and the staff who support them, need to better understand how 'college choice' will impact this population's ability to realise short- and long-term academic and athletic goals. Although there is a wide body of literature focused on college choice (e.g. Hossler et al. 1989; McDonough 1997; Pérez and McDonough 2008; Teranishi et al. 2004), there is a need to understand the nuances involved in the recruitment process of college football, and how these factors impact college choice for PI

high school football recruits. For PI high school football recruits, a spot on a collegiate football team can include a guaranteed four-year college scholarship, social mobility for their family and the potential for exposure to play professionally in the National Football League (NFL). The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the goals and expectations of PI high school football players in relation to their college decision. Specifically, this paper identifies and explores the decision-making process of PI high school football recruits and how they chose a particular college to launch their academic and athletic careers.

## Global Relevance of Pacific Islanders in American College Football

The significance of Pacific Islanders in sport goes beyond the borders of the United States. In Australia for example, I have had conversations with several universities that are considering the function of college athletics. Executives of these athletic divisions realise the ability of college sports to create cultures of belonging, and of sports to merge institutional identities with student identities, and the impact of this relationship on alumni affiliations and economic profit (i.e. increased enrolment, alumni donations, sales and broadcasting revenue, etc.). The results of this study could be useful to higher education providers who do not currently employ athletic recruitment models. The perspectives of PIs in sport found in Australia and New Zealand, specifically the policies and programming initiated by the National Rugby League (NRL), provide the United States with a paradigm shift in addressing the demographic and research population of this study, the implications of which are examined below.



## Road Map to College Football

The value of student-athletes to college sports has grown exponentially since the inception of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)<sup>1</sup> in 1905. March Madness, the National College Football Championship, its associated Bowl Games and college rivalries have made the two 'revenue sports' of basketball and football a multi-billion-dollar industry (Berkowitz 11/3/2014). The profitability of this industry has compelled the members of Division 1 college football programs to invest heavily in the recruitment of potential talent from within the ranks of our high school football system and the international community. Within the United States, many athletes and their families begin the journey in youth football, where talent is scouted by high school coaches interested in having the best talent matriculate to their individual programs. From the best high school football programs, young football players hope to be showcased to the top college football programs in the country.

The high school coach has traditionally been the gate keeper who provided a solid buffer between college football recruiters and the high school athlete, but recent participation in private off-season football academies has allowed 'specialist' coaches to begin advocating on behalf of the high school football recruits and college football coaches. Big Man academies (that work with offensive and defensive linemen) and 7 on 7 teams (that work with many of the 'skill' positions) compete at national showcases sponsored by major athletic companies (for example, Nike and Under Armor), and are meant to showcase the best talent in the United States. Not only has attending the right — professionally oriented and influential — high school football program become important, but participating with the right football academy in the off-season also has become a major concern for those families intent on receiving college football scholarships.

Once a high school football recruit has shown proficiency at the sport, college recruiters can find them in several ways. High school football coaches and academy football coaches can introduce prospective players to the college coaches on the high school campuses or by telephone, but there are also

institutional and non-institutional football camps where the high school football recruits are trained and assessed by college football coaches.

University compliance offices are responsible for regulating their own football staff with regard to the recruiting rules and schedule set by the NCAA. These rules and schedules 1) protect the integrity of the sport by maintaining a level playing field when recruiting, 2) protect high school football recruits by limiting the frequency and periods that college coaches can contact them, and 3) establish guidelines for professional and responsible moral conduct of institutional agents.

While high school football recruits may contact college coaches and visit college campuses as many times as they want without regulation, unless the college football program is interested in offering the recruit athletic aid (scholarship), their efforts are often in vain. For example, 'junior days' are non-evaluation events where college football programs try to attract the best high school juniors they can recruit, but a majority of high school players that attend these events have no chance of being offered a scholarship because they have not been identified by any of the institutional agents as 'recruitable' candidates. The personnel needs and the number of athletic scholarships college football programs have available each year restrict access for these non-ranked high school football players. In 1978, the NCAA split Division 1 football into two divisions: the 1A division known as the Football Bowl Series (FBS), and the 1AA division known as the Football Championship Series (FCS). In 2016, there were 128 teams in the FBS, each with a maximum of 85 full athletic scholarships, but limited to 25 new scholarship offers per year. The FCS consisted of 125 teams, each allowed a maximum of 63 full athletic scholarships, and limited to 30 new scholarship offers a year. Once recruits have been deemed a good fit athletically by agents of a given institution, their grades are evaluated to assess whether they meet the minimum academic requirements for athletic aid set by the NCAA. Many institutions, however, have higher standards of admission than the NCAA, and these further restrict the opportunities for high school football recruits with low academic capital. Once an institution is convinced that the

high school football recruit is a good fit, they will offer the recruit an athletic scholarship. This offer is not guaranteed, as institutions hedge their bets by offering multiple players the same scholarship 'slot' in case some choose other universities. This offer has traditionally been a one-year renewable scholarship that can be denied for renewal for any reason, including failure to contribute to team success.

Many college football recruits are unaware that most scholarships are one-year renewable contracts, but the NCAA (2014) recently allowed institutions to offer four-year scholarships to incoming recruits in response to a number of court cases that highlighted the exploitation of college student-athletes (Kukahiko and Chang 2017).

The next step on the pathway to college for high school football recruits are home visits (NCAA limits each institution to two home visits by a maximum of two coaches per visit), where the area recruiter, position coach, coordinator and/or head coach visit the recruit's home. Here the institutional agents share why their program, university, community and staff are the best fit to provide for the overall growth of the high school football recruit, and often persuade the recruit to take an official visit to their campus (Kukahiko 2015). Each high school football recruit is restricted to five 'official visits', which are campus visits paid for by the university and include the costs for travel, food and hotel (NCAA 2015). These official visits are often reserved for recruits that have been offered an athletic scholarship by the university, or for recruits the college football programs are very interested in solidifying as 'commits'. Once a player commits, however, the institution can rescind their offer until a letter of intent is signed on, or after, the National Signing Day (for college football this is the first Wednesday of February).

### Theoretical Framework

Research focused on the complex, multistage decision-making process in selecting a particular post-secondary institution spans econometric (e.g. Fuller et al. 1982) and sociological models (Alwin and Otto 1977), and a combination of the two (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) foundational model of college choice high-

lights the longitudinal process involved. The three-stage model describes the college selection process for prospective matriculants: a *predisposition* stage, a *search* stage, and a *choice* stage. Hossler and Gallagher's college choice model is fundamental, in that it continues to inform policy and institutional administrators on college decision-making, but this study requires a more nuanced framework that recognises PI ontology, axiology and epistemology, or cultural frames of reference. This is important if we are to disrupt access and equity policies that are meant to create 'traditional' pathways to higher education for 'non-traditional' students. This theoretical section reconceptualises the three stages of Hossler and Gallagher's model, making it relevant in the exploration of PI high school football recruits and how they choose a particular college to launch their academic and athletic careers.

### Predisposition

During the *predisposition* stage, students evaluate the options beyond high school graduation, including matriculating into higher education. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) state that the predisposition stage is not only the developmental phase where students decide whether to continue their education, it is also an aggregate of their background characteristics and resources; for example, social economic status (SES), academic and athletic 'ability', peer and family values towards college attendance, and resources and organisations that provide counselling and college exposure. The Hossler and Gallagher model, however, does not account for the impact of colonisation, economic imperialism and militarisation in the Pacific, and how those specific experiences have created legacies within PI communities that position PI student-athletes as cultural and racial beings within US higher education (Goodyear-Ka'opua 2013; Grainger 2006; Mayeda and Dutton 2014; Okamura 2008; Trask 2013), and whose restricted access to those institutions have put a precarious over-emphasis on college sports. Because PIs are often invisible as participants in the academy (student body, faculty, staff and administration), the academy is often perceived as an unrealistic place for PIs (EPIC and Asian Americans Advancing Justice 2014), which has discouraged a

'sense of belonging' for past, current and prospective PI college matriculants (Teranishi et al. 2009; Wright 2003). These perceptions reside within the *predisposition* of PI students. However, these same circumstances have also motivated PIs to participate in higher education 1) to honour their family and become an example for their community, 2) to contribute to conversations and literature about PI communities, and 3) as a mechanism for social mobility and an escape from generational poverty (Morita 2013).

### Search

In the traditional college choice model, it is the *search* stage where students begin to consider their various values in terms of college/university, and when institutions search for students according to the accumulation of 'merit' within potential matriculants' *predisposition* (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). Institutions assess 'traditional' students for admissions based on grade point average (GPA), standardised test scores, personal statements, and interviews that consider the various types of capital students can access and contribute on their campuses. Traditional students within that cohort will make up the general student body, consider their college values, or determinants, and develop a 'choice set'<sup>2</sup> during the *search* stage. For PI high school football recruits, however, these institutional assessments are primarily done with an exclusionary emphasis on athletic ability. Academic capital is also emphasised in this stage, but generally only to ascertain whether the PI high school football recruit will meet the institution and NCAA's minimum academic requirements to be eligible for athletic scholarship. Consequently, the 'choice sets' of PI high school football recruits are less often products of their college values and determinants, and more likely to be limited to the institution(s) that have offered them an athletic scholarship.

The reality for PI high school football recruits is that their *search* stage is a one-way power dynamic with institutions searching out the most sought-after recruits (Uperesa 2014). While the *search* process can be flattering for highly sought-after recruits, it can also be a dehumanising one that enables institutions of higher education to colonise

PI communities by exploiting its student-athletes as natural resources for their athletic labour, and the student-athletes are vetted as livestock for genetic upside and physical prowess (Beamon 2008; Uperesa 2014). This is also a racialised process within what Edwards (1985) calls the plantation system (Branch 2011; Hawkins 2013), where 55 per cent of the athletic labour are college football players of colour, and 75 percent of the college football coaches that recruit them are white (NCAA 2015).

### Choice

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) state that the *choice* stage is the last stage of the college selection process wherein potential matriculants make their final decision based on college determinants such as academic reputation, cost of attendance, location, campus environment, financial aid, etc. In the *choice* stage, college values become, or are replaced by, college determinants. Again, this model fails to acknowledge that many 'high-ability' individuals from communities of colour who want a college education do not have 'college choice', and that their college decisions are often restricted by cultural and financial barriers that leave them with short 'choice sets' that do not align with their college goals and determinants. For example, prospective PI high school football recruits may perceive their college options limited to institutions that offer them an athletic scholarship, which limits their choice set to 1) playing football on an athletic scholarship at a four-year college/university, 2) community college, or 3) the labour market (non-participation); regardless of their academic preparation, eligibility or college values.

### Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological research design was ideal for this inquiry for three primary reasons. First, qualitative phenomenological methods were chosen because they allowed for the exploration of a topic or concept through 'lived experiences' (Creswell 1998; Patton 2002). Second, qualitative methods provided the best approaches for answering 'how', 'what', and 'why' questions. Thirdly, it allowed for this PI researcher — who identifies culturally and racially with the research participants — to use

his experiences to understand those of the participants. Therefore, qualitative phenomenological methods were deemed appropriate for investigating the research questions by exploring the shared narrative of PI high school football recruits. Quantitative data were collected for a cursory descriptive analysis, and the extent to which the initial qualitative findings generalise to the PI population was assessed.

The participants were selected from an annual Polynesian cultural event for top PI high school football recruits. These high school football recruits were identified at several high school football developmental camps and were sent consent forms and surveys with their invites to a Polynesian cultural event that celebrates the top PI high school football recruits in the world. The event was hosted by the AIGA Foundation, and its volunteers were mostly Polynesian ex-college and NFL football players. Participants of the event came from any of the 49 states in the continental United States, and Samoa, Tonga, Hawai'i, Australia and New Zealand. Each cohort is made up of 70–85 high school football recruits, and this study used the data collected from the 2014 and 2016 graduating cohorts: 120 PI high school football recruits agreed to participate in this study.

Participants were asked to complete a survey that included questions about demographics, their perceptions on college recruiting experiences and desirable college institutional characteristics (e.g. contact with college recruiting staff, importance of strong academic programs, importance of athletic facilities). After being identified as student-athletes with college football scholarship offers, the recruits were given an opportunity to share written accounts of their experience and participate in focus groups of 2–5 people for 30 minutes in a private room. Twenty-five high school football players who were actively recruited by college football programs were asked to respond to interview questions regarding their college choice. At this stage, participants were given the ability to self-select out of the focus group portion of the data collection. Participants were given pseudonyms prior to focus group interviews and were informed that a password-protected electronic linking document was in use ensuring that all identifiable data would be secure and confidential.

### Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data analysis was framed within the study's theoretical frameworks. To ensure reliability of the research, however, the data was coded using three techniques within a constant comparative analysis; open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Creswell 2003). During open coding, or the initial stage of organising the data, narratives were categorised into each of the six sub-categories of their community cultural wealth. Through axial coding, or the interconnecting of categories, student experiences and narratives were placed into the appropriate stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model: *predisposition*, *search* and *choice*. During the selective coding process, the analysis attempted to understand whether participants' *search* experiences were associated to specific characteristics of *predisposition* in a predictive manner.

The research questions that guided this study were answered within the constant comparative analysis. My first question was answered within the open and axial coding processes: What factors influence and/or determine 'college choice' for Pacific Islander high school football recruits? My second question was answered during the selective coding process: How do the experiences of PI high school football recruits modify or extend current models of college choice? This analysis not only gave a better understanding of how athletic, academic, aspirational, social, cultural and navigational capital influence the college choice for PI high school football recruits, but what characteristics of their predisposition determines 1) the type of *search* experience they will have, 2) whether they will have the opportunity to exercise their college values and determinants to create a choice set, and 3) whether their college choice aligns with their college values and determinants.

### Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive analysis below uses survey responses and national data sources to create generalisability in the research population. It investigates the key factors for PI high school football recruits within each stage of this study's college choice model. The *predisposition* represents the accumulation of athletic, academic, aspirational, social, cultural

and navigational capital that participants come to the 'bargaining table' with. The *search* stage tells us what college 'values' are important to the participants in creating their 'choice set', or list of college options (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). The *choice* stage separates what is important to participants from what will ultimately determine their actual college decision; in this stage, college values are replaced by college determinants. This descriptive analysis indicated whether there were nuances in the college values of participants with different *pre-dispositions* and *search* experiences, and whether there was a contradiction between what participants believed was important and what ultimately determined their college decision.

PI high school football recruits are often from households that are hard pressed to support the financial weight of the increasing cost of tuition in US higher education. The significance of an athletic scholarship offer on the college choice for such recruits could be influencing the level of importance they are attributing to some of the college values/determinants on the survey, and/or during interviews. That is, if the anxiety of receiving an athletic scholarship were removed, or that participants could all assume multiple offers from highly competitive academic and athletic programs, would they rank the college choice determinants differently? Would they assign more importance to certain determinants if receiving an athletic scholarship were not a concern? A limitation of this dataset is that this population is not representative of all PI high school football recruits, because the participants of the Polynesian all-star event are vetted by the host organisation not only by talent assessment, but by GPA requirements that align with the NCAA academic standards; thus, the participants of this study only represent four-year university eligible PI high school football recruits.<sup>3</sup>

## Findings

This study has three major findings. First, the data analysis uncovered three distinct *search* experiences based on the athletic capital within the *pre-disposition* stage of the participants. Second, while academic capital either extended, or limited, the number of athletic scholarships available to participants,

scholarship opportunities remained dependent on the presence of significant athletic capital. This did, however, empower highly ranked PI high school football recruits with low GPA and standardised test scores (low academic capital), to develop 'choice sets' that prioritised universities with high academic standards, and thus, made college choices that aligned with that college value (high academic capital). This finding highlights the importance of both external and internal values of academic capital, at least for highly ranked PI high school football recruits, and should therefore modify and expand current college choice models for this particular research population. Third, only participants that had accumulated enough athletic capital within their *pre-disposition* stage had the opportunity to use the full range of values and determinants to develop a 'choice set', and then act upon that choice set in making their college choice. This finding is especially important because the NCAA's GOALS study aggregated the data from 611 Division IA, Division IAA, Division II and Division III member institutions on college choice, transition and persistence factors. If the analyses of PI high school football recruits are relevant to the larger population of college student-athletes, however, the findings herein suggest that the highly ranked 'outliers' attending the most competitive college sports programs will corrupt the generalisability of the data collected in the NCAA's GOALS study.

## The Role of Athletic Capital in the Predisposition and Search Stages

### Predisposition

The data analysis found that the aggregate amount of athletic capital that PI high school football players accumulated within their predisposition stage predetermined their recruiting, or *search* experience. The Power 5 are the top five ranked college football conferences in the NCAA, and high school football recruits offered by any of these schools have the opportunity to accrue the most athletic capital. Conversely, recruits with 'offers' from Division II, Division III or NAIA programs have low external evaluations of athletic capital. This analysis discovered that three categories of recruits existed

within the predisposition stage. One group had multiple offers, with at least one from a Power 5 football program; this category was named the '3–5-star recruits'. The second group had an average of 2–3 offers from FCS schools, but no Power 5 offers, and was named the '0–2-star recruits'. Participants in the third category did not receive any Division 1A or 1AA (FBS and FCS) scholarship offers, and were labelled the 'non-ranked high school football players'. Within the narratives of all participants, two major themes were believed to influence their access to college athletic scholarships: exposure at competitive high school football programs and the evaluation of their talent by sports media and college recruiters at football showcases/camps.

### Competitive High School Football Programs

For the participants involved in this study, the value that external actors (i.e. high school/academy coaches, sports media companies and college coaches) attributed to their athletic talent was highly indicative of whether they had any college choice at all. During interviews, participants shared that athletic capital was often something that was accumulated over time. For many, it began in youth football (ages 8–14) when coaches recruited 'the best talent' to create highly competitive club teams whose quest was to win national championships in multiple age divisions. One 3–5-star participant explained how youth football gained him access to one of the top high school football programs in the country, which helped him to attract the most media attention and provided him credibility and exposure to college coaches.

I played Pop Warner with a bunch of other Polynesians, and so I enjoyed the game, and learned to love football. One of my Polynesian Pop Warner coaches played college football, and he really got me to believe I could earn a college scholarship playing football. He introduced my cousin and I to the [name of high school deleted] head coach, who told us that he had just graduated several players to major college football programs. My family and I decided that we would attend [name of same

high school deleted], because Coach [name deleted] had convinced us that playing at a competitive high school football program was key in getting us to the next stage.

This 3–5-star recruit believed that matriculation from youth football to a successful high school football program had a significant impact on his college opportunities by affording him a competitive advantage in the accumulation of athletic capital. This was a common theme, and some participants were even recruited onto the middle school football team as a 'feeder' system into the high school football program.

### Sports Media and Football Showcases/Camps

Participants also shared that sports media played a part in the evaluation of their athletic capital by identifying top performers at Nike and Under Armor camps, football showcases/camps and football academy competitions. Interviews revealed that while the internal value of participants' athletic capital influenced their football effort<sup>4</sup> in high school, the value that sports media and college recruiters attributed to their athletic talent ultimately directed their recruiting, or *search* stage of 'college choice'. One highly recruited participant, now at one of the top college football programs in the country, shared his experience being evaluated by sports media and college recruiters:

When I was a freshman I attended Nike's elite camp, and performed well against one of the top ranked defensive guys in the country. It kind of put me on the map. During my sophomore and junior years, some coaches liked my highlight film, and I picked up some offers at camps and unofficial visits. By my junior year Scout.com and Rivals had me ranked as a four-star recruit until I won Under Armor's five-star challenge, which showcased the top offensive and defensive lineman in the country. After I won that, they had me ranked as the number one high school player at my position. By my senior year I had offers from every major college football program, but most of those came over the phone from coaches that never even

met me [he laughs]. I think all of us that were invited to play in the Army and Under Armor All American Bowl games had the same offers from the same schools.

This narrative suggests that athletic capital is not only something that can be accumulated by PI high school football players; it is something that is being distributed by sports media and college recruiters. The evaluation of athletic capital by sports media and college recruiters correlated to the number of athletic scholarship opportunities each participant was able to evaluate in the *search* stage.

### Search

The data analysis confirms that the three categories of predisposition for PI high school football recruits correlate with three distinct recruiting experiences. While the national ranking system for high school football recruits is convoluted and often more problematic than helpful — a process further complicated by sports media companies that report different rankings on the same individuals — these rankings play heavily into the *search* stage of this research population. Again, the three predisposition categories are the 3–5-star recruits, 0–2-star recruits, and non-ranked high school football players.

### 3–5-star High School Football Recruits

Sixteen of the 120 participants of this study were identified as 3–5-star high school football recruits with multiple scholarship offers, and at least one from a Power 5 school. Participants shared how FBS schools had identified and recruited them as early as eighth grade. One participant was offered an athletic scholarship in ninth grade through a network of youth, high school and college football coaches. All of the 3–5-star recruits in this study had their first offer no later than Spring of their junior year.<sup>5</sup> One 3–5-star participant shared his recruiting process and how he created his choice set:

I had done well at several elite camps like the AIGA camp and the Rivals camp. After that several college coaches came to my high school to visit and talk with me. Wyoming was the first to offer me a scholarship dur-

ing my junior season, after that San Diego State, then Fresno State, and then the rest of the Mountain West schools. It wasn't until I attended the Arkansas elite camp, and got an offer from them, that the bigger schools started offering me. Once I got my UCLA offer, the rest of the Pac 12 schools and several other Power 5 programs offered me. My family and I really took a look at my options, what schools fit my academic goals, what coaches we felt were honest and would support me, and then we narrowed it down to my top five schools before I made my decision.

This narrative reflects how institutions search and evaluate recruits, and through that process, how and when PI high school football players are able to search and evaluate the institutions. The 'reciprocal *search*' process was unique to participants within the '3–5-star recruit' category.

### 0–2-star High School Football Recruits

Twenty-five of the 120 participants of this study were identified as 0–2-star high school football recruits with at least one offer from an FCS football program, but no Power 5 offers. 0–2-star high school football recruits were often *searched* for by institutions, or recruited, 'late' in the recruiting process. One FCS college coach elaborated on his reasons for offering recruits late in the process:

I would like to think that every kid I recruit has a dream of playing at our school, but the reality is he doesn't. Most kids who we end up signing [committing to us] believe they will play at a Power 5 school during their sophomore and junior years. I've thrown out offers to kids during their junior years, and though most of them are genuinely appreciative, you can still sense the lack of pure excitement. It's hard for me to gauge how interested a kid is in our school when he doesn't have a lot of interest at the time. I tend to save my offers for kids when they are in their senior years. Sometimes I even wait for their season to be over. The other big reason I don't like to throw offers out too early is I simply don't want to tip any "sleeper recruits" off to the

big schools. Granted, everyone knows who everyone is, but the second a kid is offered, he has an immediate target on his back in which other schools are aiming much more at.

The strategy described by this FCS coach allows for lower-revenue schools to avoid wasting time and money on athletes that will accept scholarships from more 'competitive' programs whose broadcasting contracts provide athletes more media exposure. Most of the 0–2-star recruits in this study were offered within the final 3–5 months leading up to National Signing Day.<sup>6</sup> One 0–2-star participant shared about the brevity of his *search* process:

I only had one offer going into January of my senior year. Two weeks before Signing Day the coaches from the AIGA Foundation helped me pick up two more offers. I was able to fit in two official visits on the last two weekends of January, to Montana State and Sacramento State, before committing on Signing Day. Both the schools were able to come meet with me and my family on home visits three days before I took my official visits to their campus.

When offers are made late into the process, official visits must fit within a smaller time frame that already competes with high school game schedules, SAT/ACT tests,<sup>7</sup> final exams and the December and January dead period (where institutions cannot have contact with recruits); thus, the search process is significantly curtailed for 0–2-star recruits. Some participants in this study were even offered after National Signing Day, although most college football programs have already committed their available scholarships by then.

### Non-ranked High School Football Players

Seventy-nine of the 120 participants of this study were identified as non-ranked high school football recruits with no scholarship offers from any Division 1A or Division 1AA college football programs. This finding suggests that a majority of potential high school football recruits, even amongst targeted all-stars, are not receiving athletic scholarship offers. The non-ranked high school football play-

ers in this study required assistance in initiating the *search* stage for colleges, because Division 1A and 1AA college football programs had not identified them as 'recruitable' candidates. Volunteers at the AIGA Foundation's Polynesian high school football all-star event found out which participants did not have college athletic scholarship offers, and assisted these non-ranked high school football players in reaching out to the organisation's network of college coaches. One non-ranked participant at the event shared his college *search* experience:

I have started varsity since I was a sophomore, and have competed well at every camp I have been to, but I don't have an offer yet. If I don't receive a D1 offer, then I will go to a junior college to prove myself. The coaches from the AIGA Foundation got me some D2, D3 and NAIA offers, but I know I can play D1 ball. Coach [name deleted] said that the D2 schools can offer me half academic scholarship and half athletic scholarship, but I don't have the grades or the [test] scores to get the academic scholarship. If junior college doesn't work out, my grandfather can get me into the union.

Many of the non-ranked participants shared that their *search* process was often limited due to logistical access to college coaches in environments where they could be evaluated, since the NCAA heavily regulates this process, and the financial barriers in travelling and attending camps and recruiting events at college campuses. The narrative above was common amongst non-ranked players that were not offered a Division 1A–AA scholarship, and many were in the process of deciding whether playing football would remain a college value/determinant for them. Many in this non-ranked group were also considering to play at a community college to gain exposure for D1A–AA football, or play for a Division 2, Division 3, or NAIA college football program. These non-D1 programs are able to offer partial athletic aid, and/or academic aid, but not full athletic scholarships. These non-D1 programs also do not have the recruiting budgets that D1A–AA programs have to engage recruits in the *search* process.

### Factors that Shaped the Choice Process

The hypothesis that emerged from this finding was that the significance of an athletic scholarship offer on the 'college choice' for non-ranked high school football recruits could be influencing the level of importance they are attributing to other college values and determinants, while 0–2-star and 3–5-star recruits who already have scholarship offers have the privilege of putting higher levels of importance on those same values and determinants. That is, would non-ranked recruits — given the breadth of college choice afforded by scholarship offers from multiple collegiate division-1 programs — rank college choice values and determinants differently? Would non-ranked recruits assign more importance to certain determinants if receiving an athletic scholarship were not an issue of concern? The following section explains how the study tested this hypothesis.

#### Non-ranked High School Football Players

Eighty-six per cent of the non-ranked participants mentioned that playing football, and/or getting a scholarship offer, would determine their college decision. When asked, 'What is important in selecting a college/university?' participants shared various college values that had to do with academics, home and family, religion and comfort. Here are

Table 1: College 'Choice' Values for Non-ranked

What is important to you in selecting a college/university?
It has my intended major, and is really good at producing Graphic Designers into the work force.
The overall university and business program they provide plus job placement after graduating.
I feel comfortable on the campus and I like the city it's in.
College campus is close to home.
Family in the area of campus.

some responses non-ranked participants shared to this question (Table 1).

However, when asked, 'Ultimately, what will determine where you will commit, or attend?' 44 per cent of non-ranked participants shared that a scholarship offer will ultimately determine what college they will attend. This finding suggests that 44 per cent of non-ranked participants are making college decisions that misalign with their college values because an athletic scholarship is the deciding factor. Table 2 illustrates the dichotomy that exists between what non-ranked participants say is important in their 'college choice' versus how they are actually making college decisions.

Table 2: College 'Choice' Values vs College Decision Determinants for Non-ranked

What is important to you in selecting a college/university?	Ultimately, what will determine where you will commit or attend?
That I get to go to a university that has my field of study and a football program	Where ever I get offered I will go
The education and the football program	Offering a full scholarship
Fits my strengths Has my major	Where I can play the most
An offer to play football	An offer to play football
The academics of the school	Scholarship
I have friends that play or attend the school	Scholarship. Otherwise will start my LDS Mission
Education, community, culture, well rounded athletic program	Money situations and comfort
How much do my parents have to pay?	If I have a scholarship to pay for it, I will go there.
A school that me and my family are comfortable with.	I am not looking to go to a specific school. I will most likely commit to the school that offered me first.

**Table 3: College 'Choice' Values vs College Decision Determinants for 0–2-star**

What is important to you in selecting a college/university?	Ultimately, what will determine where you will commit or attend?
Teammates, coaches, and the environment	Scholarship offer
Academics of the school. Placement rate in the NFL Excellent education	Scholarship offer
I want to feel my college to feel like a home away from home	What will determine my choice of commitment will be the opportunity of my chances of playing
My parents wanting me to go there	Depth chart on my position. If my family can get to watch me play. Scholarship offer!
Being close to home.	Scholarship and close to home
Parents want me to go.	Scholarship offer.

**0–2-star High School Football Players**

While 60 per cent of the 0–2-star participants mentioned that playing football, and/or getting a scholarship offer, would determine their college decision, only 28 per cent of the 0–2-star participants shared that a scholarship offer will ultimately determine what college they will attend. Table 3 illustrates some examples of the dichotomy that exists between what 0–2-star participants say is important in their 'college choice' versus how they are actually making college decisions.

Even though the same dichotomy existed for 0–2-star participants between their college 'choice' values and college decision determinants as with non-ranked participants, college values remain an important part of understanding what components of community cultural wealth are going unrealised in the 'college choice' for PI high school recruits. The narrative of one 0–2-star participant suggests that cultural capital is important in the decision-making process, but one that may be unrealised by a majority of this study population:

**Table 4: College 'Choice' Values vs College Decision Determinants for 3–5-star**

What is important to you in selecting a college/university?	Ultimately, what will determine where you will commit or attend?
The feel is right	Relationships and feel
I consider what the university has for me after college is over.	It is a family decision, but academic majors and football will help me decide where I commit to.
Relationships	Relationships
It fits me and has great academic and football program	My parents and I
School will provide great alumni/professional network	School will provide great alumni/professional network
Food	Coaching Staff
Academic support	It's a family decision
My major and academic support	Major and academic support
Weather	Weather
If I will grow mentally, physically, socially and most importantly spiritual.	Where I will grow into the best version of me possible.

I want to commit to a college football program filled with other Polys like me. Being surrounded with Polys [makes it] very competitive, but it brings all of us together as a family.

### 3–5-star High School Football Players

Twenty-seven per cent of the 3–5-star participants mentioned that some component of football was important to their college choice. None of the 3–5-star participants mentioned 'scholarship' as a determinant of where they will attend college. Table 4 compares some of the most salient college choice values of the 3–5-star participants with the determinants of their actual college decisions.

### Implications and Significance

#### Future Research

While PIs are strategically targeted for their athletic labour they maintain the lowest graduation rates of any group of any sport in the NCAA (2015), which suggests that the relationship between the PI community and US higher education has become one of exploitation. The low graduation rates suggest there are discrepancies between what PI high school football recruits believed was important in their college choice and what they actually need to persist at four-year universities. A continuation of this research as a longitudinal study could help us to understand the high attrition of PI college football players.

Qualitative data from such proposed research are necessary to inform policymakers, faculty, administrators and the staff that support this population on how they can minimise attrition and retain the PI football players they recruit. If institutional agents continue to purposefully and intentionally recruit PI football players (Kukahiko 2015; Uperesa 2014), this research could help to identify the shared interests of the institutions that financially benefit from college football, and the athletic labour that represent its profit centres. That is, transition and retention of PI college football players serve the interest of both the institutions and the PI community, by maximising each party's return on investment. In this way, it is in both parties' interests to fund culturally appropriate programs that

enhance transition, well-being, sense of belonging and student persistence (Allen 1991; Morita 2013; Tierney 1999; Wright 2003). Marketing this information and the success of these programs to future generations of PI high school football recruits should also improve an institution's ability to secure commitments from top recruits during the *search* stage of their college decision-making process.

### PIs in Sport: The Example of the National Rugby League (NRL)

It was not until I was invited to watch the Pacific Tests in Australia in April 2015 that I realised what was fundamentally missing for PI student-athletes in the United States. I was about to watch my first rugby league international test match ever. These particular international test matches included two test matches between four Pacific nations; Papua New Guinea versus Fiji and Tonga versus Samoa. As I walked into the stadium and wandered around the booths, all the merchandise was adorned with Polynesian print, each representing the Pacific Island nations of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. It was within this context I was informed that nearly half of the National Rugby League<sup>8</sup> (NRL) was of PI descent, and, as we were escorted to our seats, I could not help but notice the overwhelming number of PIs wearing their national colours and waving the national flags of their birthplace.

The Tongan and Samoan pre-game show included Tofiga Fepulea'i, a Samoan comedian from the Laughing Samoans, and a cultural celebration of Samoan and Tongan dance. The performers walked out onto the field together, representing both nations, and as they began their dances the fans of both cultures screamed in support with echoes of the fa'aumu (traditional drums) reverberating in the stadium. The crowd response continued to get louder for the introduction of the Pasifika<sup>9</sup> players (whose names were all pronounced correctly), even louder for their respective national anthems, and reached a climatic crescendo during the face-off, when each team performed their own war dance. These war dances were a paradigm shift from the displays of masculinity performed by many US high school and college football teams; this was a

celebration of cultural sovereignty, a Pasifika collective culture and the cultural nuances of individual island nations.

The sport itself had become empowering, healing and an extension of cultural identity; 48 per cent of the professional athletes in the NRL identifying as PIs. Add the Indigenous population of Australia, and these groups make up a majority of the NRL's professional players. Uperesa and Mountjoy (2014:265) have suggested that sport in the Pacific had become a 'counterrepresentation to persistent stereotypes, as a proud representation of a nation, as an alternative pathway toward a promised future, and as a site of cultural resurgence'. This, however, is not the natural progression of sport in the United States, as illustrated in this study. In the case of the NRL, the cultural empowerment of sport was intentional, specific in its design, and executed by delivering culturally responsive programs through the NRL Welfare and Education Office. These efforts were led by ex-Pasifika players and scholars committed to empowering PI rugby players — partly in response to a rise in mental health issues and suicide amongst Pasifika players — and their communities. Instrumental to the development and realisation of these programs was the NRL's all-time leading try-scorer Nigel Vagana, and Dr Roannie Ng-Shiu of the Australian National University (ANU).

During my stay in Australia, Vagana explained to me how his collaboration with Dr Ng-Shiu, and scholars from the University of Western Sydney, had created cultural processes, programming and education standards for what have become the NRL Welfare and Education programs. Some Pasifika and Indigenous NRL players felt empowered by these programs, and in one case, the player was not only able to heal from physical and psychological trauma, but became an NRL spokesman for mental health issues within Pasifika communities. Indigenous players, specifically, believed that the NRL's community outreach programs allowed them to help their communities heal from histories of colonisation. In the NRL, players are mandated to spend 20 hours a week in vocational training or university coursework to improve their transition out of professional sport. Also, a relocation policy that uses a Cultural Impact Reporting tool was

developed to assess what the players would need to transition from one team to another if they were traded. This tool takes into account their background and cultural heritage to enhance transition to new geographic locations (i.e., church, academic support, family support, etc.). Culture was purposeful and collaborative even in marketing, as illustrated by the player-initiated calendar that celebrates each of the Pasifika players' island heritage, and empowered the players to participate in how their cultural identities were constructed and shared by the media.

During a tour of the Warriors' facilities, Jerome Ropati (an ex-player and current team ambassador) took us into the team meeting room where the teleprompter rotated through team profiles that explained each player's career pursuit outside of rugby. This was not a public space, but a private space where only the team was allowed, and was positioned to direct its message to the players. This is part of the NRL's *Career Wise* program that is focused on developing each player's transition out of rugby. This program was also designed to educate rugby fans to the multiple roles and identities of the NRL players. To accomplish this, the *Career Wise* program marketed playing cards that showed each player in action, but as carpenters, athletic trainers, students, cultural warriors or fathers. This program sends a message to young aspiring players that rugby does not define the entirety of their beings and it deconstructs the dominant axiology that attributes more value to the athletic components of their identities. Young fans can now aspire to be businessmen, cultural scholars, parents, etc. (see Figure 1).

Many of these programs have been implemented by the NRL to respond to the number of suicides of young Polynesian rugby players over the past few years. Due to the early recruitment of players into the professional rugby league system (as young as 15 years old), there is often a lot of pressure put on these young athletes to provide for the livelihood of their families. As NCAA member institutions and the Power 5 consider the professionalisation of college football, the example of the NRL and sport in Australia and New Zealand become more imperative. The NRL's holistic approach to the cultural



Figure 1. Career Wise is a program that places value on other aspects of players' identities.

Source: Courtesy of the NRL.

empowerment of sport is in direct contrast to the neoliberalism of US college football that profits from its student-athletes as alienated labour, and subjects them to the deculturalisation model of its universities (Tinto 1988).

### Conclusion

This study revealed that PI high school football recruits had similar college values despite their different recruiting experiences, but only highly sought-after PI high school football recruits had the ability to exercise 'college choice' as framed by traditional models. Our findings reflect that there are three distinct categories of PI high school football recruits, with very different college recruiting experiences depending on the amount of athletic capital each has been able to accumulate. Consequently, the college football system increases access to higher education for PI high school football recruits by lowering academic requirements at elite universities and providing athletic aid, but the evaluation of athletic talent, position needs, and the limitation of scholarships at each college football program restricts this pipeline. Therefore, national college participation rates for PIs are not likely to see sig-

nificant increases through college football, and the dependency of this population on the accumulation of athletic capital has a majority of this study's participants attending colleges that do not align with their 'college choice' values. The findings of this study suggest that a majority of PI high school football recruits are simply following the money (athletic aid).

### Author Notes

Keali'i Troy Kukahiko is a PhD candidate in the UCLA department of Higher Education and Organizational Change. He focuses his research on programs in higher education that will improve the transition, persistence and degree attainment for students of Colour. Specifically, Keali'i investigated the college experience of Pasifika college football players, and the ability of critical service learning courses in developing critical consciousness and healing from trauma. Publications in these areas include *Racial Diversity Deficit in College Football: Fixing the Pipeline*, *Maximizing Educational Opportunities for Pacific Islanders in College Football*, *Assessing the Development of an Emerging Critical Consciousness through Service Learning*, and *Realizing a Critical*

*Framework for Service-Learning at an American Public Research University.* Keali'i is a member of the AIGA Foundation, founded the Pacific Islander Education and Retention (PIER) program at UCLA in 1998, and Prodigy Athletes in 2005.

### Endnotes

1. The NCAA is a non-profit organisation that regulates and organises college athletic programs programs in the United States and Canada.
2. Hossler and Gallagher (1987:214) define a choice set as 'a group of institutions that a student has decided to apply to and seek more information about in order to make a better final matriculation decision.'
3. Since this event occurs in January (or second semester) of their senior year, some participants may become ineligible for scholarship, per the NCAA academic standards, during the course of completing their senior year in high school.
4. Football 'effort' is defined here as the amount of time, preparation and focus put into football as a pathway to college.
5. Official written offers cannot be made until 1 August of recruits' senior year.
6. The first National Signing day occurs on the first Wednesday of February. This is the first day that high school football recruits can sign their Letters of Intent (LOI) to the institution they wish to attend.
7. The SAT and ACT are standardised tests required of all potential high school matriculants as part of the admission process to any US four-year college or university.
8. The National Rugby League is regarded as the world's elite rugby league championship and, per season, is the most viewed and attended rugby football club competition in the world.
9. Pasifika is an umbrella term that refers to all peoples from the Pacific region including Papua New Guinea in Melanesia, the Marshall Islands in Micronesia and Aotearoa/New Zealand in Polynesia. Grainger (2006:55), however, suggests that Tagata Pasifika provides 'a source of identification with a diasporic Black Pacific culture: an inclusive postcolonial identity and subjecthood that transcends the boundaries of nation', while Fernandez (2003:576) believes that Pasifika offers a transnational affiliation that provides a means for 'contestation over local discourses of power and race'.

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