College football programs at the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level invest “hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to lure the highest-rated recruits to their programs” (Jessop, 2012, para. 1). Thus, the decisions recruits make regarding the colleges they choose to play for are important, and subsequently, have been heavily researched by scholars. Past studies examined student-athletes’ decisions regarding their college choice, and the decision is based on the academic value of a college degree, the academic reputation of the school, receiving financial aid, and the potential to have a career in professional sport (Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Letawsky et al., 2003; Mixon et al., 2004; Schneider & Messenger, 2012).

Interestingly, Magnusen et al. (2017) suggested extending signaling theory to college recruiting. Signaling theory argues organizations utilize a variety of subtle messages to promote or convey information about their firm to individuals (Celani & Singh, 2011; Lee & Cunningham, 2015; Cunningham & Melton, 2014; Spence, 1973). Within recruiting, potential student-athletes receive subtle signals from teams that affect the likelihood of selecting those colleges.

While Magnusen et al. (2017) examined the effects of performance-, reputation-, and support-based signals on college basketball recruiting, there remain several signals that may be more alluring for recruits that were unaccounted for in the recruiting literature. For example, some athletes are motivated by immediate playing time and driven to attend schools with that opportunity (Bricker & Hanson, 2013; Schneider & Messenger, 2012). Similarly, teams averaging more plays per game or more yards per play may be more exciting for recruits, and, therefore, teams the recruit would want to join. In contrast, undisciplined teams that accrue more penalties, causing the game to slow down, may be less appealing for recruits. Therefore, many subtle signals are being sent to recruits that affect recruiting.

The purpose of this study is to examine the recruiting performances of college football teams based on several subtle signals that may be enticing to recruits. To examine these signals, this study analyzes data from Division I FBS teams from 1999-2000 to 2019-2020 seasons. The unit of analysis will be a team-season and are included in the sample if ranked by 24/7 Sports, Rivals, or ESPN. The dependent variable will be average recruiting rank among the three recruiting websites. Independent variables will include offensive yards, points scored, penalties accrued, number of freshmen whom started in the prior season, past success of the head coach, university academic rank, average season attendance, and capacity and age of the university football stadium.

Athletic departments can use this information by increasing the recruiting ability of their programs, when hiring coaches whose coaching strategies could increase recruiting efforts, and to reinforce signals on webpages or in communication with athletes. Recruits can benefit from this study by understanding signals being sent to them and potential unconscious bias they may have for programs. Scholars can benefit as they examine recruiting issues, understand signaling theory, or try to properly control for recruiting effects or coach personnel decisions (e.g., promotions, dismissals).