



## The 2020 National Student-Athlete Coronavirus & Recruiting Study

### **What do college coaches need to know about student-athlete attitudes towards recruiting and choosing a program in the age of the COVID-19 crisis?**

That was the question we wanted to answer for college coaches tasked with recruiting student-athletes, and interacting with their current team, during the COVID-19 crisis gripping the country.

The challenge for college athletic departments is significant: Continue to bring in quality prospects to compete in their program, and retain their current student-athletes, all while dealing with budget cuts, limitations on campus visits, and working remotely. Not only do their rosters depend on it, but many college campuses depend on their athletic departments to help them fund campus through student-athlete enrollment.

To give coaches the information they need in order to be successful at this core part of their job as coaches, we conducted focus group surveys of recruited and current college student-athletes. Those participating in the study, conducted between June 2, 2020 and June 15, 2020, represented both male and female respondents from all division levels and sports.



A total of 2,432 current college student-athletes were asked about how the virus, and the resulting changes in daily life, family income and other factors are contributing to their outlook as a college student and athlete.

Additionally, we talked to 873 actively recruited prospects who are in the process of making a college decision, and received their feedback in similar categories measured with the first group of current college student-athletes.

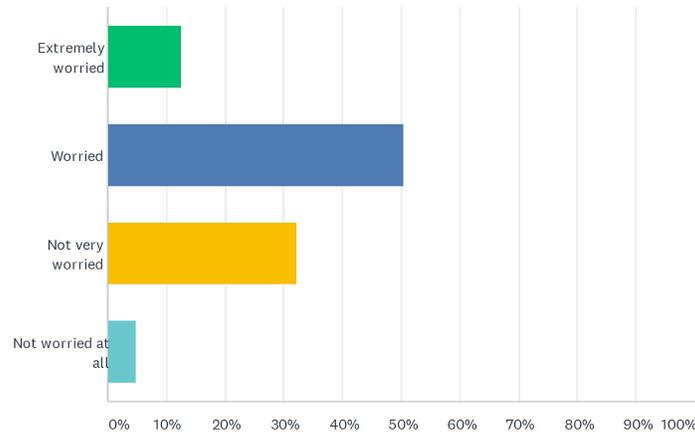
Based on the results of this study, coaches need to understand their prospect's outlook on college, and the basis for their prospect's decisions during the recruiting process. If they don't, the struggle to assemble the best roster possible is going to become harder than it ever has before.

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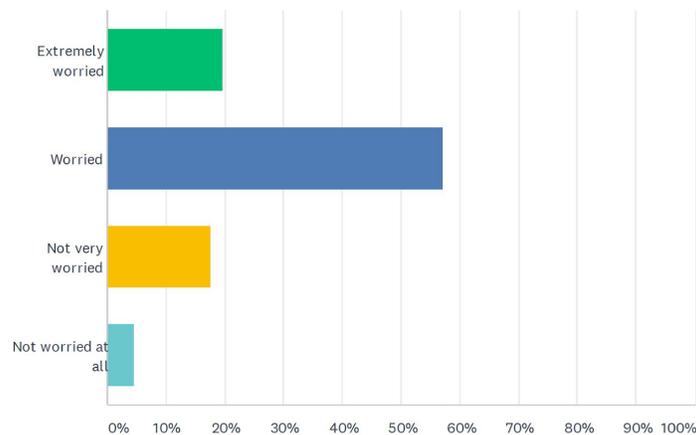
## **How worried are prospects and current college student-athletes when it comes to how the COVID-19 virus will impact their college athletic experience?**

Overall, we're seeing a significant level of worry among current and prospective student-athletes who have gone through this crisis. Their lives, athletic careers, education and family life have been disrupted, and it's showing when it comes to how they currently feel about their place in the college athletics world. Coaches need to understand how to alter their communication because of it.

Among *prospective* student-athletes, worries about college, their athletic career and the stress associated with the process is significant. More than 6 out of 10 recruits are worried about the impact of coronavirus on their college education, as well as the quality of their college sports career when asked to measure their own feelings on the topic.



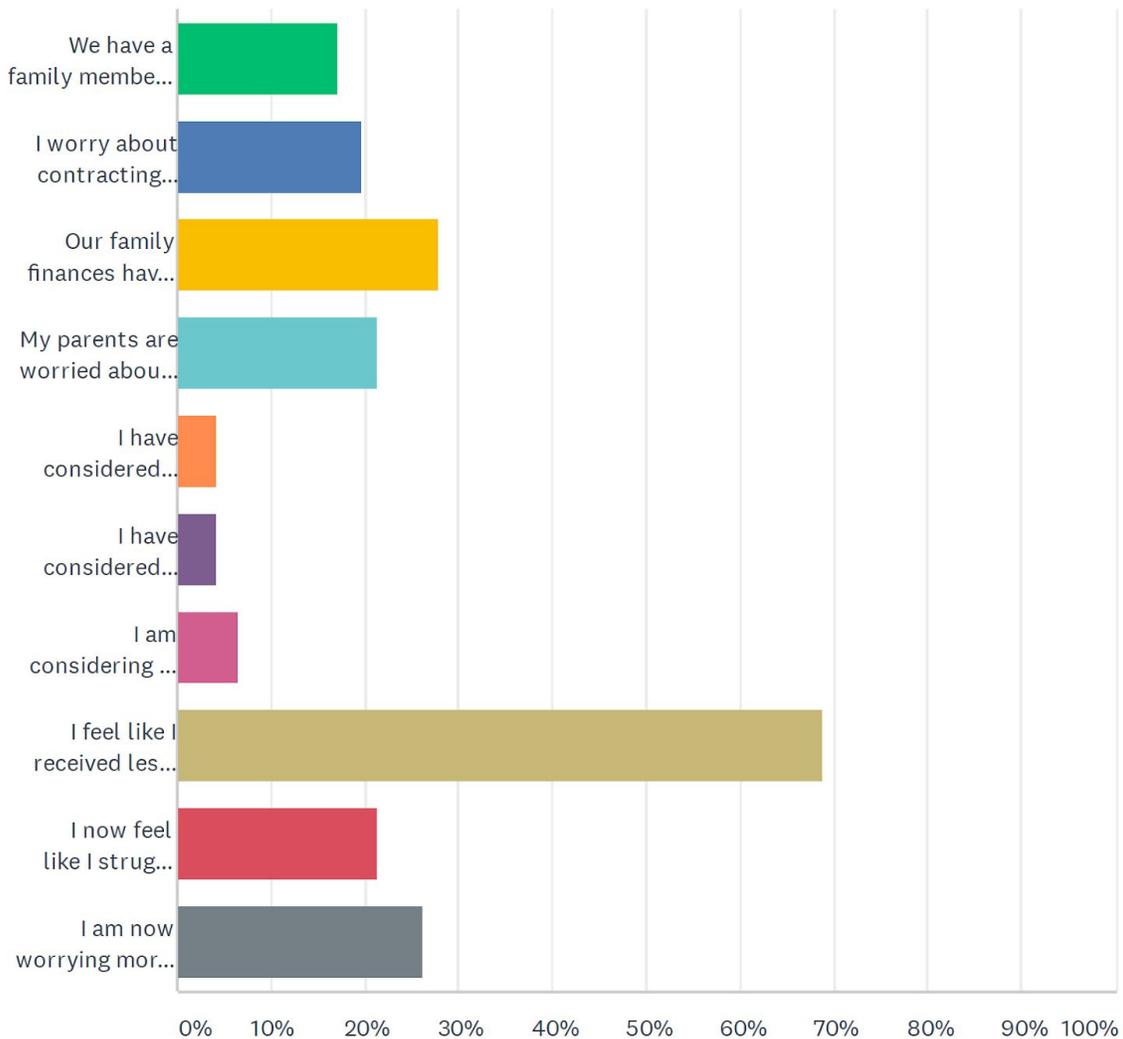
It should be noted that many respondents commented that they weren't worried about contracting COVID-19; rather, they were worried about the impact it might have on their college and athletic experience. A similar percentage of *current* college student-athletes expressed the same level of worry:



**Our key take-away for coaches:** There is both an opportunity and an obligation to open the door for conversations about their worries and the stress that this has caused during the past few months. Not just for prospects, but also for your current student-athletes on your team's roster.

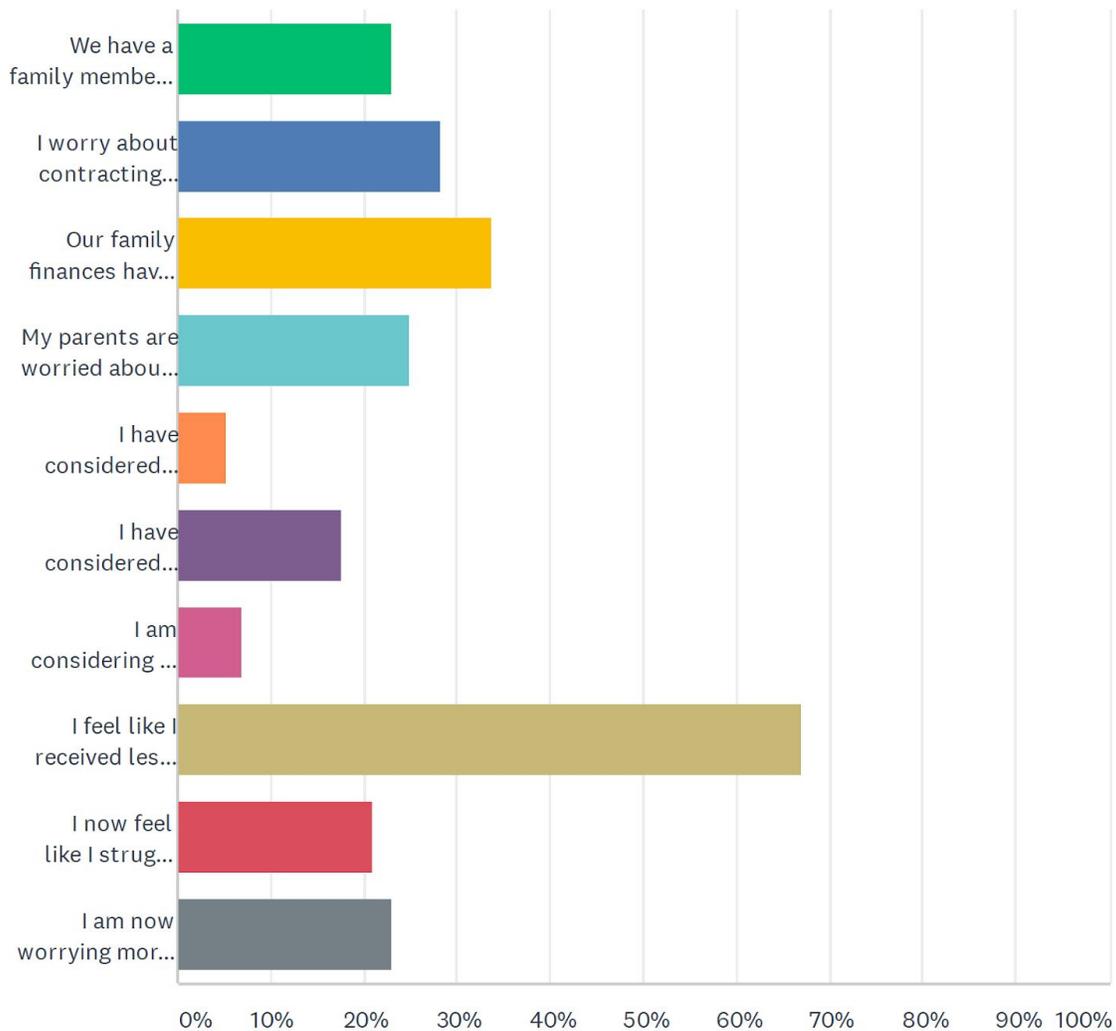
Their worries could translate into transfers, struggles in the classroom, and mental health needs that a coach should want to know about as soon as possible.

## Your prospects and current student-athletes have two primary worries: The quality of the education they're getting, and the increasing cost for that education.



When asked how they and their family has been affected by the COVID-19 crisis, currently recruited athletes are dealing with a variety of emotions and circumstances that are affecting their decision-making process, according to the results shown in the chart above.

Most notably, as many switched to online learning in their high schools to finish out the 2019-2020 school year, **68.8% felt like they received less of an education as a result.** That mirrored the feedback we received from current student athletes, as seen in the results when we asked them the same set of questions:



Other notable findings in this set of questions we asked both recruited prospects, as well as current college student athletes:

- Nearly 30% of your recruited prospects have seen their family finances affected, and a similar percentage are now worried about how they will pay for college.
- About 1 out of 4 parents of both recruited prospects *and* current college student-athletes are expressing concern to their sons and daughters about going back to college campuses with the COVID-19 crisis still continuing.
- 19% of recruited student-athletes, and 28% of current student-athletes, express worries about contracting Coronavirus when they are able to return to their college campus for the 2020-2021 school year.
- Very few student-athletes are seeing this crisis as a reason to leave their current college campus in favor of a different one. Only 5 out of 100 recruited and current student-athletes say they are considering switching college commitments.
- Additionally, less than 7% of each group say that this crisis is causing them to consider not competing as a college student-athlete this coming school year, and opting to focus only on their studies instead.
- Lastly, an average of 20% of each group report knowing someone who has contracted Coronavirus.

**Our key take-aways for coaches:** As colleges emphasize online learning as a possible option in 2020-2021, college administrators, athletic departments and coaches need to be aware of the negative perceptions associated with that path forward. This feeling, combined with the growing financial burden that the crisis is causing student-athletes and their families, will mean all parties on a college campus will need to more thoroughly justify the education they are offering, the positive end results of earning a degree from their university after competing there as a student-athlete, and the investment required for that opportunity.

Coaches and college officials would be wise to increase their interaction with parents of their recruited and current student-athletes, given their worries about the crisis and their influence on the final decisions made by the prospective student-athlete.

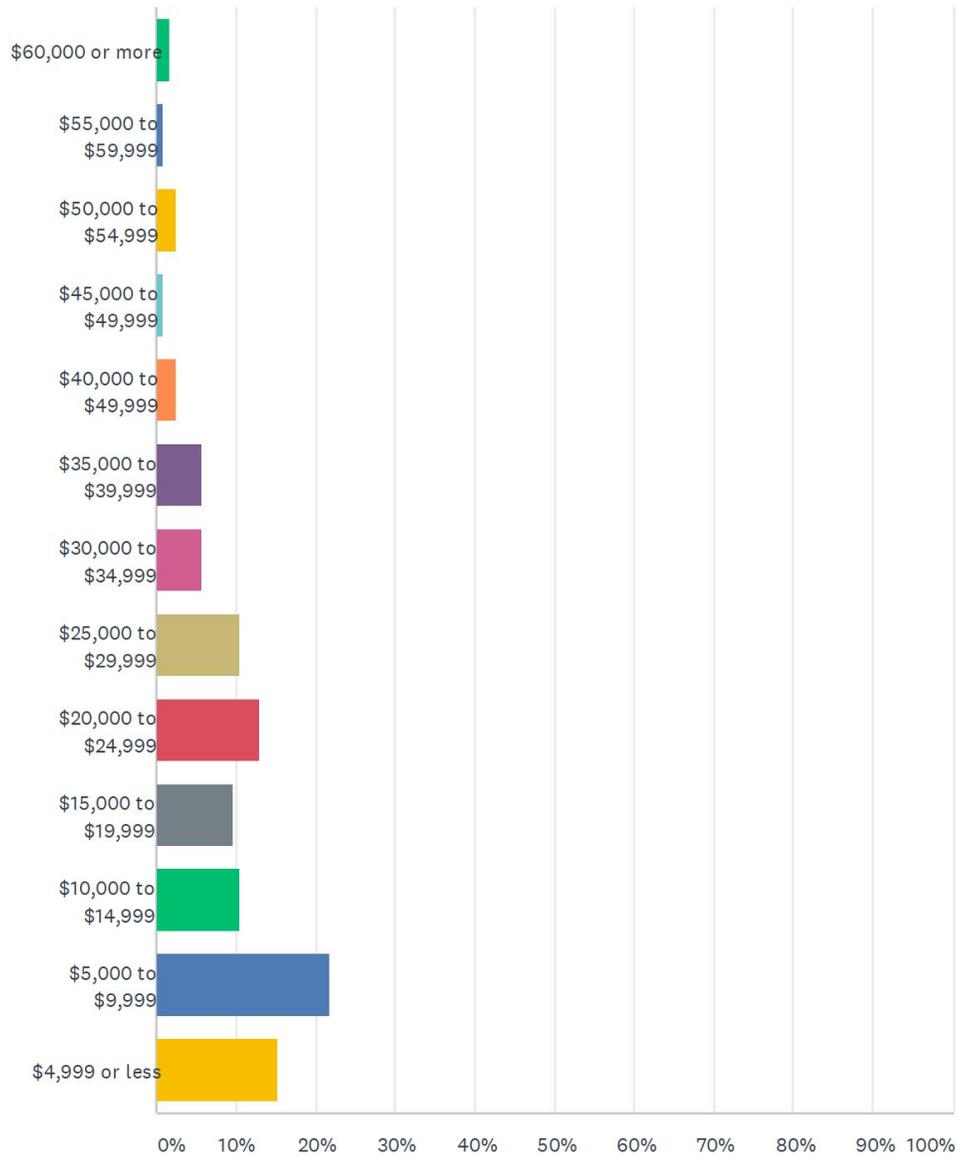
College athletic officials would also be wise to devote time to develop an in-depth understanding of their college's financial aid, scholarship and admissions process. Talking about the cost of college and the student-athlete experience (unless a full athletic scholarship is an option) is going to be something that will distinguish coaching staffs who are able to maintain healthy recruiting numbers, and those who won't.

College coaches should also take time to talk about their student-athletes' feelings and emotions surrounding the crisis, with 1 out of 5 reporting increased battles with depression currently.

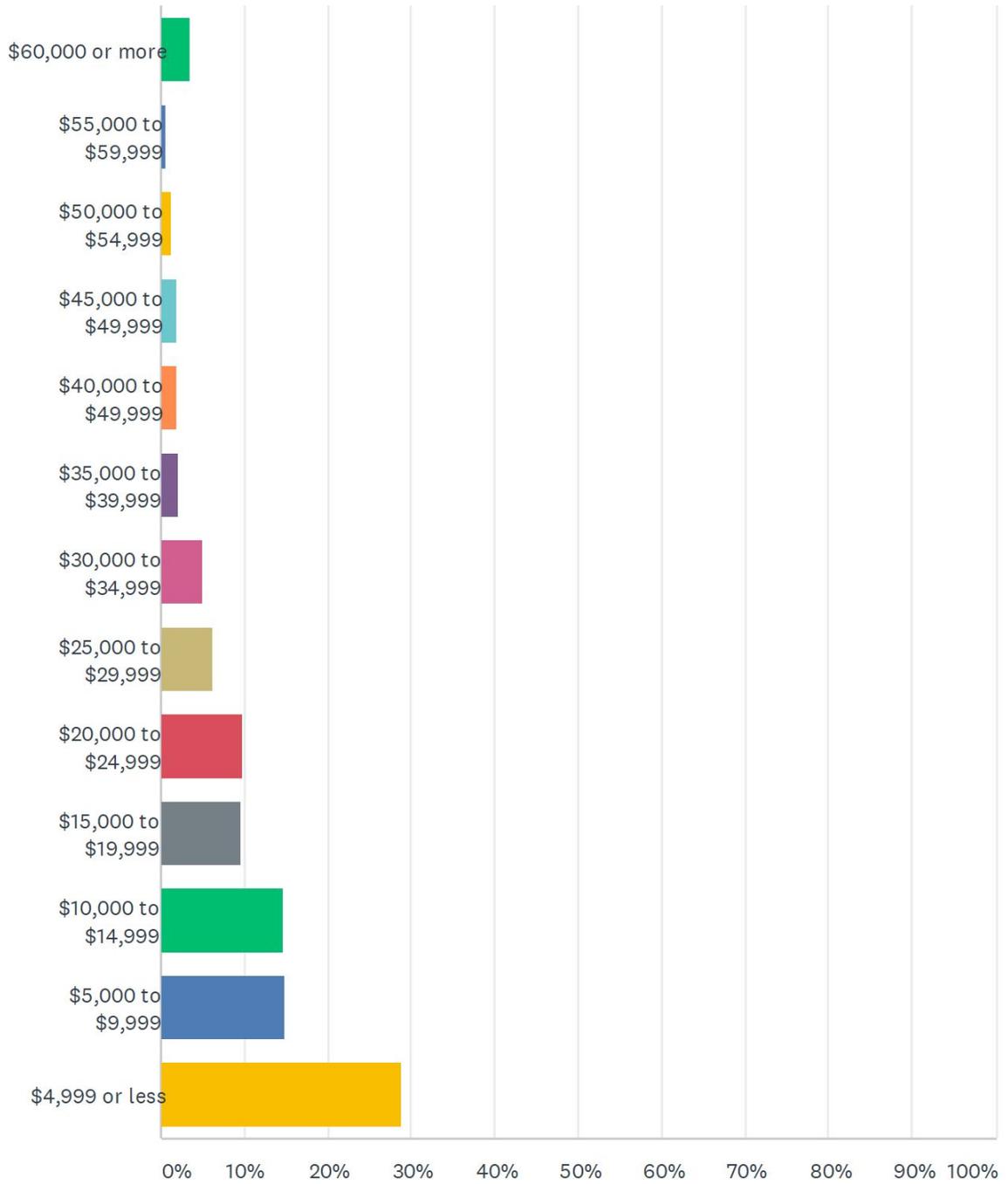
## **More on student-athletes' view towards college affordability in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis:**

When asked what they feel their families could afford as a maximum out of pocket cost for their college and student-athlete experience, not surprisingly, both recruited and current student-athletes leaned towards lower investment options.

*Prospective student-athletes' maximum out-of-pocket investment:*



*Current college student-athletes' maximum out-of-pocket investment:*





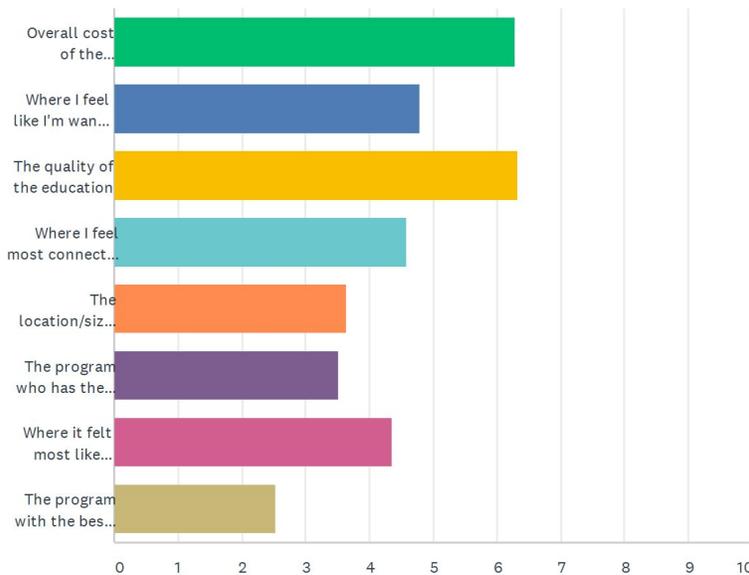
- Approximately half of the student-athlete respondents in both groups say they could only afford to pay out-of-pocket costs of no greater than \$15,000 annually.
- The bulk of those student-athletes (38% of prospective student-athletes, and 43% of current student-athletes) say they could pay no more than \$10,000 or less in out-of-pocket college costs as a student-athlete.

**Our key take-aways for coaches:** The average cost for public universities approached \$22,000 in 2019, and private colleges averaging slightly above \$47,000 in annual tuition, room and board costs, college administrators will have to find ways to justify the costs of the education and student-athlete experience at the college level. And, as stated previously, coaches will need to work on having earlier conversations with parents and prospects about their budget for college, while building a plan for justifying that investment over a long period of time through consistent recruiting communication, and probing conversations.

The reasons for this recommended approach center around the myths that a majority of prospective student-athlete and his or her parents hold on to as they go through the process:

Many student-athletes and their parents believe that the longer they show interest, and confirm that the college contacting them is “in their top five” - and other such assurances - will improve your offer later in the process. Whether that’s the truth on your campus or not, be prepared to deal with this strategy from your prospects. They are working through their process, as well, and want to secure the best possible outcome for themselves. *Your message to them is paramount.*

## So what's driving the decisions of this next class of prospects?



When prospects were asked to rate their decision making factors, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being most important), we find that student-athletes are focused on the quality of the education (with an average score of 6.82) and the overall cost of the college recruiting them (with an average score of 6.27) as the two leading factors that are driving them towards interest in

one college program versus another. That's not surprising, given some of the previous data we've highlighted earlier in this study. It's the secondary factors that could be adding to their decision making factors during the recruiting process.

We find that similar to studies Tudor Collegiate Strategies has done in the past, student-athletes are looking to belong. For example, the third most impactful aspect of their decision making is finding a place "where I feel like I am wanted" (with an average score of 4.97). Next in line was the place "where I feel most connected with the team" (with an average score of (4.59) and "where it felt most like home when I visited campus" (4.36).

**Our key take-aways for coaches:** Be prepared to talk about the cost of your college early on in order to gain an understanding of how your prospect's decision will be made, and how well what you're able to offer them lines-up with their needs.

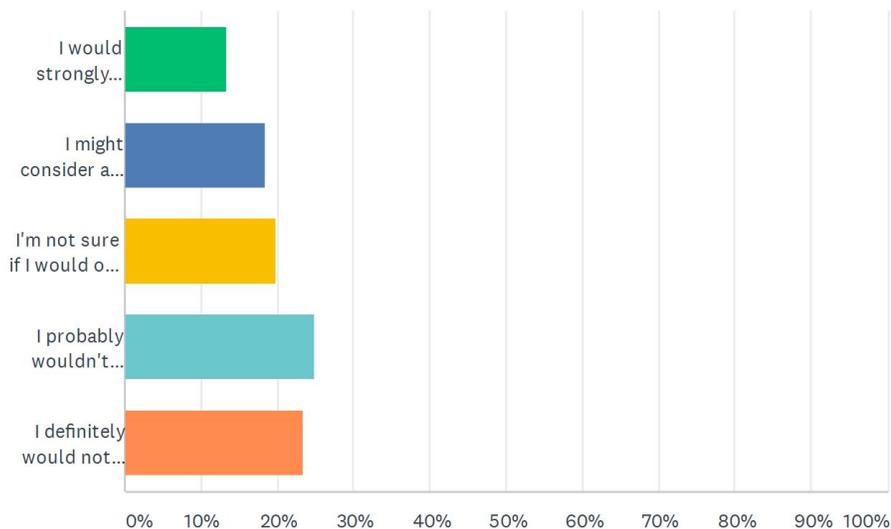
In addition, focus on what you do have control over: The feeling you create during the recruiting process, the visit to campus, and your regular interactions with the family of your recruit as you communicate with them. Where gaps in some of the practical aspects of the college choice exist (cost, perceived value) those can often be filled by giving them the feeling of being wanted, valued and listened to during the recruiting process.

## Keeping your current student-athletes is more important than ever. And, it's going to be increasingly harder to do

Among current college student-athletes, this study identifies a trend that many colleges and their athletic departments should find troubling:

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, and the subsequent financial hardships it is creating for families across the country, more current student-athletes than ever before are open to the discussion of switching schools if a better financial offer was offered.

Roughly 32% of all current student-athletes surveyed said they would either strongly consider or possibly consider transferring to a different campus. Across the board, the current population of those competing at the collegiate level have mixed feelings on the idea. After being asked, *“If you knew another college or coach could offer you more academic or athletic scholarship money to transfer to their school, how strongly would you consider that idea?”* our respondents offered a variety of outlooks, as shown in the results below:

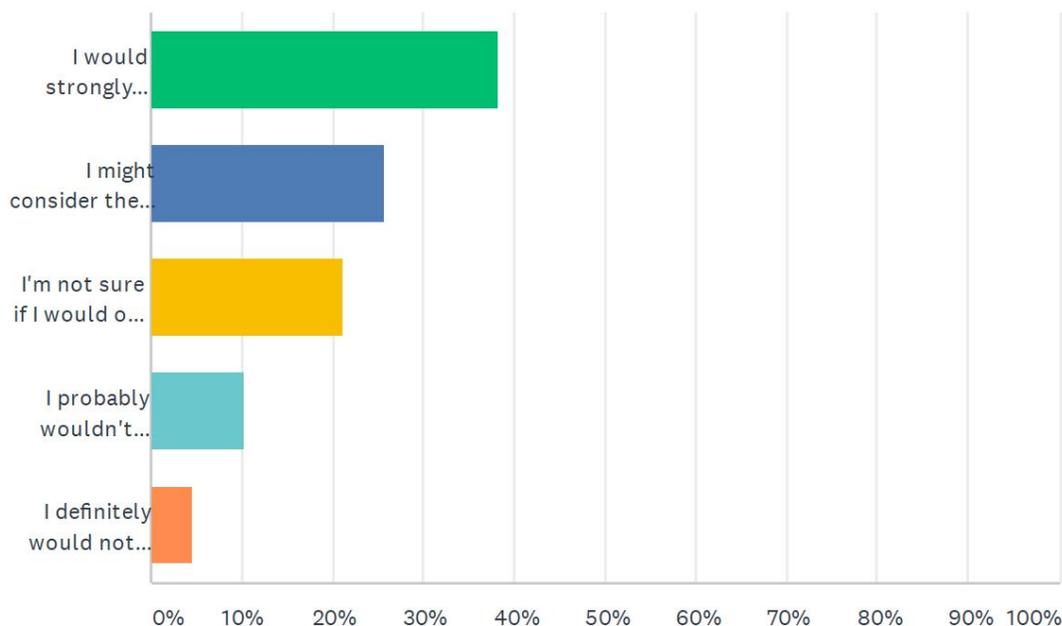


The good news for college athletics and the campuses they call home is that while 20% weren't sure how they would answer that question, a slight majority of respondents (48.2%) said they probably or definitely would *not* consider switching institutions.

## New trend: Prospects you're in the middle of recruiting are even more likely to be lured away by competitors

Among current college student-athletes, the allure of more money and a better perceived situation is even easier to act upon.

They haven't made friends at their prospective college yet, they aren't plugged in to the campus culture, and (because we've already discovered some of the core ways their decision-making has been altered by the COVID-19 crisis) it could be in their financial best interest to switch decisions sooner rather than later, as evidenced in their responses to the same question we asked current student-athletes:



A whopping 64% of recruited student athletes would either strongly or possibly consider switching decisions if there was a better financial offer from another campus or coach. Equally surprising is that only 4.69% of recruited student-athletes said they would definitely not consider another offer. The crisis has radically changed their 'buying decision' for 2020.

**Our key take-aways for coaches:** Because transferring and changing their mind is easier than ever, and culturally more accepted as a part of the life of a college student-athlete, the stage was set heading into the 2019-2020 school year for an increase in transfers and de-commitments among both prospective and current student-athletes.

The COVID-19 crisis added a “perfect storm” element to the mix: A shutdown that canceled their seasons, disrupted their education, cut them off from the social ties that are important, caused them to begin to worry about the health impacts of living on a college campus, and had their family experience financial hardships that many student-athletes either had not experienced before, or caused a second look at the feasibility of investing in their college education and sports experience moving forward.

The result? College student-athletes are more open than ever before to the idea of transferring if it proves to be a financially beneficial move. That also means intrepid college coaches, their programs, and their admissions departments have a unique opportunity to circle back with recruited students and student-athletes who had previously decided against their campus or program, and re-opening discussions about switching decisions heading into the fall of 2020.

College athletic departments need to institute a broad plan for creating the kind of environment student-athletes will want to be a part of by better connecting them with the rest of the athletic department, and reminding them why they made the choice to be there. In short, you’ll need to continually recruit them to *stay* at your college or university. We would recommend this largely be led by the department administrative level, and coordinated with coaches as primary stakeholders in the effort.

Ignoring this emerging trend comes with significant risks: At time when as many as a quarter of all colleges around the country are at risk of closing due to decreased enrollment and vanishing tuition dollars, a decline by even 10-15% in athletic department numbers could mean a hastening of that crisis on their campus.

This is one of the more serious aspects to the findings in this study. Admissions departments are already watching the storm clouds gathering ahead of a steep decline in available student prospects in the upcoming classes of 2025 and 2026, due to the decline in birth rates in 2008 and 2009 in the midst of The Great Recession; adding the significant loss of current students leaving campus would be a catastrophic gut-punch for a good number of financially unstable institutions.

## More feedback from prospects and current student-athletes

When asked the open ended question, *"As they communicate with you, what types of things should coaches be talking with you about between now and the time you head to campus when it opens? What do you need to hear from them?"*, recruited student-athletes focused on a desire for transparency and truthfulness from coaches who recruit them.

"I would personally like to hear from a coach is how comfortable student-athletes are on campus and how well they connect with the rest of their teammates," said a number of prospects surveyed. And staying in line with their concerns about cost and the feeling of being a part of the right team, many surveyed student-athletes echoed this sentiment expressed by one recruit: "We as recruits are wanting the best bang for the buck, but we're also trying to fit in with the right team. I want to know about the team...get a feel for the vibe that the team has. And, I want to know about how to bring down the cost of college - like what things can I do to get a better scholarship."

In addition, prospective student-athletes focused more on a desire to hear a coach outline a plan for them once they get to campus, and why the coach sees them as a key part of the incoming class. This matches what we've seen as a trend over the last decade: Recruits want to understand why coaches want them, and what college will be like once they get there - especially now, with an increased level of uncertainty during the COVID-19 crisis.

As one student-athlete summed it up, "Be reassuring with recruits but not promising anything. Everyone is scared and anxious right now, so having a stable force of reassurance is what I would need. I have been reconsidering my commitment for many reasons, including COVID-19, and I feel less valued by colleges now after COVID-19 began." Coach, that could be your prospect - the one you really, really need for your next class - giving you that feedback. Are you showing him/her that they are valued?

Finally, when it comes to what's worrying them, both prospects and current student-athletes listed concerns about interruptions in their college career and upcoming sports season by nearly a 3 to 1 margin. They appear to be much more concerned about short term disruptions in their lives as college athletes, while not being as concerned about the potential health risks associated with the COVID-19 crisis.

## About Tudor Collegiate Strategies



For questions or conversations about this latest recruiting study from Tudor Collegiate Strategies, contact Dan Tudor at [dan@dantudor.com](mailto:dan@dantudor.com), or call/text to (661) 809-6200.

TCS also provides the college athletic community with a variety of other resources designed to improve their outreach, communication and results when it comes to communicating with this next generation of student-athlete prospects.

### On-Campus Recruiting Workshops

For training on how to utilize these findings effectively for the upcoming recruiting classes, invite Dan and the experts at TCS to campus for a multi-day training session with your athletic department. We've designed special instruction for coaches and athletic directors that will outline how to best communicate with upcoming student-athlete recruiting classes in order to achieve maximum results. Hundreds of these workshops have been conducted around the country over the last decade, with fantastic results.

### Work with Tudor Collegiate Strategies

The team of experts at Tudor Collegiate Strategies works one-on-one with hundreds of individual sports programs and coaching staffs around the country, helping them recruit more effectively through developing better recruiting messaging, more defined recruiting timelines, and training clients to lead the conversation with recruits the right way.

### Expert online training

In addition to the array of free recruiting tools at dantudor.com, coaches and athletic directors can access two inexpensive online training resources. Coaches can go through comprehensive recruiting instruction through Tudor University, which gives coaches multiple different levels of advanced training and provides certification for their ongoing professional development. In addition, coaches can subscribe to our daily Honey Badger Recruiting training website and receive the latest information, research and strategies that we see working for college coaches in real time. Both options are effective development tools.