

Case Study
Teaching Note:
Finding The Next
Great Head Coach



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What qualities should the Director of Athletics and search committee look for when hiring a new head men’s basketball coach?

An underlying dynamic in this case that should be acknowledged at the outset of discussion is the uniqueness of hiring a coach in the sport of men’s basketball. Whether openly acknowledged or not, there are generally different standards of performance accountability applied to coaches in revenue-producing sports (such as men’s basketball, football, and women’s basketball) than in other sports. For example, while a field hockey or tennis coach may be expected to win as part of their job description, whether they are successful or not does not make a significant difference to the bottom line of the athletics department. On the other hand, the competitive performance of revenue-producing sports significantly impacts overall financial wellbeing. Accordingly, performance expectations and compensation levels in these sports reflect this reality.

Begin the discussion by having the participants compare and contrast the differences between hiring a top-level employee in a revenue generating unit of a traditional business (for example, Chief Revenue Officer or VP of Sales) with hiring a football or basketball coach in college athletics program. Answers tend to cover a broad range, and should be written on a whiteboard and discussed. Below is a partial list of similarities and differences that students should come up with.

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May require stronger evidence of successful past performance before being hired. • Likely be held to a higher standard than non-revenue producing employees. • Likely to be given more leniency for on-the-job mistakes, assuming they are performing sufficiently in producing revenue. • Will be highly coveted by competing organizations if they are successful, giving them more leverage in their current roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach may surpass athletic director in informal power if performance goals are significantly and consistently exceeded. • Coach’s performance can single handedly influence the national perception of both the athletics program and university. • Coach likely to become the most recognizable individual in both the athletics program and university as a whole. • Cost positive employees unlikely to be terminated, whereas coaches with winning records are fired regularly.

Next, have participants discuss how accountability changes within an organization when the majority of its revenue depends on the performance of just a few individuals and/or business units. Key questions to stimulate discussion include:

1. Is it fair that athletic directors are judged primarily by the performance of the football and men’s basketball teams, when the mission of the college athletic programs is to provide a first-class experience for student-athletes in all sports, regardless of wins and losses?
2. Should a football or basketball coach be held to a different standard than the coach of a non-revenue producing sport? Does it make sense that they are often given less time to turnaround a program than a coach of a non-revenue producing sport?
3. Whom would you rather hire: (Option 1) a coach that wins 90% of his games, but graduates only 50% of his players, or (Option 2) a coach that graduates 90% of his players, but wins only 50% of his games? Does your answer change depend on the sport?

4. Can an athletic director avoid having an accountability bias towards non-revenue producing coaches, when from a purely economic standpoint, whether they are successful or not makes no difference to the overall athletics bottom line? Is there anything they can do to hold themselves in check?

The conclusion the search committee should come to is that administrators in college sports should try to hold revenue producing coaches to the same professional standards as non-revenue producing coaches. This means that athletics directors shouldn't let the pressures created by the positive or negative performance of such teams unduly influence their decision-making processes when it comes to hiring/firing their head coaches. It also means they should be willing to give their head coaches more time to turn around a team, particularly because it is likely to take longer for the coach to recruit players that not only fit their own philosophies, but also the unique culture of the university. Incremental progress, no matter how slow, is better than restarting the process over and over again every few years. The importance of consistency and continuity in leadership cannot be overemphasized.

What weight should be given to the prioritized qualities determined by the search committee and director of athletics?

Athletic directors' words are sometimes inconsistent with their actions and how they allocate funding. For example, most ADs express their highest priority as maximizing the overall student-athlete experience. Yet budget distributions and hiring priorities do not often align with this philosophy (see the previous discussion on winning coaches versus those with high graduation rates). How often do ADs claim – when firing a head coach – that they did everything right but win?

To challenge participants in aligning desired coaching candidate qualities, each search committee is asked to develop the top qualities (no more than 10) desired in the head men's basketball coach. The committee should then rank these qualities in prioritized order of importance in evaluating coaching candidates. An example of such a list can be found below, and the Coach Hiring Matrix provides many additional qualities to consider.

1. Competitive Success (winning percentage, post-season performance)
2. Academic Success (APR, GSR, FGR, GPA)
3. Recruiting Success (recruiting rankings)
4. Disciplinary Record (scandals)
5. Student-Athlete Leadership Development
6. Mentors (success of former employers)
7. Playing Experience
8. Similarity of Previous Employers (to current institution)
9. Values Alignment (religious, ethnic and cultural background)
10. Professional Player Development

Next, participants should be asked to give a percentage weight to each quality/variable with the sum total being 100%. Because the participants have already ranked their qualities in order of priority, the highest percentage weight should be given to the first ranked quality ('Academic success' in the previous example). The following is an example:

- Academic Success (25%)
- Competitive Success (20%)
- Values Alignment (15%)
- Discipline (10%)
- Previous Employment (10%)
- Recruiting (5%)
- Leadership Development (5%)
- Professional Player Development (5%)
- Mentors (2.5%)
- Playing Experience (2.5%)

Participants may decide to re-rank their qualities but will realize the inconsistencies in their values aligning with their practical application to a head coach hire.

Finally, participants should confidentially rank the candidates on each of the qualities based on their interviews, profiles and additional research. For example, the following may be developed by the participants:

- Academic Success (25%)
 - Candidate A (1)
 - Candidate B (2)
 - Candidate C (3)

- Competitive Success (20%)
 - Candidate B (1)
 - Candidate C (2)
 - Candidate A (3)

- Values Alignment (15%)
 - Candidate C (1)
 - Candidate A (2)
 - Candidate B (3)

If the facilitator chooses, participants can be asked to mathematically calculate each coaching profile to determine quantitative outcomes of each candidate. Often, this additional activity compels participants to not only further realize the inconsistent reward structure relative to articulated values, but further defines the quantitative emphasis placed on winning. If this activity is included, a discussion on the role of winning in a zero-sum context (the average coaching record is .500) may include the following discussion questions:

- As one of the few countries in the world that integrates sports within higher education, what is the educational role of winning in American intercollegiate athletics?
- In what ways did participants' values evolve as they quantified each quality?
- What would an athletics department model look like that aligned reward with values?

Which coaching candidate will the Director of Athletics hire? Why? (20 minutes)

The participants should collectively review each candidate profile and watch their interviews. The group leader should facilitate a discussion around the quantitative and qualitative variables. The discussion should begin with the school's profile and most urgent priorities, and walk through the diversity of issues by engaging each participant. The following questions can guide the conversation:

- What are the school's and athletics department's greatest needs in this hire?
- What are the candidates' strengths relative to those needs?
- What are the candidates' liabilities relative to those needs?

Each committee member should confidentially rank the three candidates in order of which one they would hire for each vacancy. Once each individual makes a decision, for discussion purposes, share the rankings and discuss each members' rationale. Participants should try to remain true to the sociological constructs of their personal profiles within the search committee's dynamic. The following outline can be used to emphasize the sociological and cultural implications:

- Presidential pressure on the Athletics Director to make a splash hire
- Significance of a diverse candidate pool/hire
- SWA and Associate AD feeling bypassed for job promotion
- FARs focus on academic performance
- Title IX concerns
- Student-athletes on the team transferring
- Relationship of the Basketball Alum to one of the candidates

The search committee should attempt to come to a consensus on who to hire for each vacancy, a conclusion which may be difficult because of the competing interests outlined in each committee member's role, the varied nature of the needs of each institution, as well as the imperfect fit of the candidates. Once some sort of decision is reached – whether through consensus or by the choice of the individual playing the role of athletics director – the committee should put work to put together a statement or list of reasons justifying the decision for the hire that they would use with external stakeholders such as the media and fans.

Discussion (30 minutes)

Ultimately, a coaching hire is measured in performance results. The breadth of variables included in performance measurements ranges from ticket sales to competitive success to graduation rates. Hiring success in college sports is mixed and uncorrelated with things like institutional resources and program tradition.

A coaching search is far from an exact science. Yet, it has evolved to being highly scrutinized, volatile and significant to the leadership and reputation of entire universities. If the primary role of intercollegiate athletics is to maximize the development of student-athletes using an 'athletic curriculum,' those we most entrust to facilitate student-athlete development are coaches. With substantial investments in men's basketball programs, the stakes are high in crafting a precise search process with a clearly defined vision for the outcome.

To explore the full dynamics of the search process, facilitators should engage participants in a meaningful discussion about the experience they just went through. To begin, each search committee should report on their process using the following outline:

- What was learned by identifying, ranking and weighting candidate qualities? In what ways do qualitative and quantitative variables differ and can be used effectively in a search?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of having a search committee?
- In what ways is using a search firm advantageous?
- In what ways did participants expand their perspective by viewing the search process through another role?
- How should coaching candidates be evaluated?
- In what ways do personal relationships and professional aspirations complicate a search?
- There are many good coaches, but not every good coach is a good fit for every institution. In what ways can 'fit' be evaluated/measured?