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The Cultural Cover-Up of College Athletics: How Organizational Culture Perpetuates an Unrealistic and Idealized Balancing Act

Using a combined grounded theory and case study methodology, Jayakumar and Comeaux examined the role of organizational culture in shaping the lives of college athletes, particularly related to negotiating dual roles as both student and athlete. Data collection involved 20 interviews with athletes and stakeholders in the affairs of intercollegiate athletics at a Division I public university, as well as field observations and document analysis. The story that emerged from this breadth of data corroborates with and is largely told through the powerful counternarrative of one key informant who is a former Division I college athlete. Findings reveal a cultural-cover up imposed by an idealized image of achieving excellence in academics and athletics, that masks inadequate organizational support toward academic success. While academics are espoused as a priority at the university and within an athletic department that features an academic support system (e.g., tutors, computer center), and although the importance of balancing a dual student/athlete role is constantly reinforced verbally, underlying messages and structures push college athletes toward a greater focus on athletics at the expense of their academic futures. Implications for organizational change are discussed.

Keywords: intercollegiate athletics, organizational culture, grounded theory, athlete, coaches, leadership

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They talk about how academics are a priority; you are here for an education. You hear it. But when you show up . . . you are herded into a room to take your physical. They are weighing you, they're seeing how tall you are, poking at you, trying to feel around for injuries. You get the feeling that you are like cattle to them, but that's just the name of the game, I guess. Then, for the next couple of weeks it's just football. . . . I played in three big games before I saw an actual college classroom. . . . It sets the tone for where you set your priorities and, really, how your college career is going to be. . . . You are there for sports. Regardless of what other people say . . . all of what you do is telling you that you are there for sports, and academics come second.

—Chaz, former Division I college athlete¹

Chaz, a former star football player, graduated from high school with a 3.9 GPA and an SAT score close to 1200 out of 1600. He began his college career at University West (UW), a public Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) school with a world class reputation for both academics and athletics. Nearly seven years later, after excelling on the football field and graduating with a master's degree in public health, Chaz recalled his first experience on campus, after committing to the athletic department. He offers a snapshot of the early socialization process of college athletes, touching on the organizational challenges and pressures one encounters that almost immediately require negotiating the often competing roles of both student and athlete. The narrative quote above runs counter to popular perceptions and stories about college athletes taking advantage of their athletic potential and shirking educational responsibilities (e.g., Dent, Sanserino, & Werner, 2014). It demonstrates inconsistent institutional messaging and begs the question of what role the athletic organization—the entry point and support system set up for college athletes—plays in shaping role conflict, negotiation of identities, and academic outcomes. This study seeks to highlight the challenges faced by athletes in revenue generating sports. Specifically, we explore the organizational role of the university athletic department in shaping the overall experiences of college athletes in Division I football.

Historically and today, intercollegiate athletics continue to be an integral segment of the U.S. campus, eliciting both celebration and controversy. There are undeniable social and academic benefits to participation (Brown, Brown, Jackson, Sellers, & Manuel, 2003; Ryan, 1989; Wolf-Wendell, Toma, & Worphew, 2001). College athletics affords educational opportunities to individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, instills civic values of loyalty, creates camaraderie, and provides

publicity and entertainment to valued supporters on campus (Sylwester & Witosky, 2004). Participation can positively impact students' self-esteem, persistence, college satisfaction, gains in internal locus of attribution for academic success, racial tolerance, and the development of cultural values (Brown et al., 2003; Pascarella, Edison, Hagedorn, Nora, & Terenzini, 1996; Taylor, 1995; Wolf-Wendell et al., 2001).

Nonetheless, the business of college athletics and its evolving ethos arguably stand in contrast to the very purpose and educational mission of colleges and universities (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010). The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (2010) points to the current business-like model of intercollegiate athletics, which prioritizes athletics over academics when it comes to funding structure, institutional values, and the treatment of college athletes. This is especially true in Division I colleges, where pressure from coaches and the stakes for winning are particularly high (Eitzen, 2012). Given that only 2% of college athletes in Division I football are projected to make it to the National Football League, it is concerning that on average 45% of Football Subdivision School football players are not receiving college degrees (Madsen, 2014; New, 2015). In the literature review ahead we explore individual and organizational factors impacting college athletes' academic outcomes.

College Athletes'² Dual Roles and Conflict

On average, Division I college athletes devote more than forty hours per week to sport-related activities, not including additional hours potentially lost due to mental or physical fatigue or injuries (Wolverton, 2008). Striking a healthy balance between academic, social, and athletic lives can be difficult; many college athletes find that the demands of one role make it difficult to meet the demands of the other (Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, Boyd, & Rullan, 2009; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Adler and Adler (1991) found that male revenue college athletes enter college with feelings of optimism and pragmatism about their academic roles but many devalue their academic role as early as their second semester, largely because sport demands structurally inhibit athletes' academic presence on campus. Under such conditions, athletes can experience academic and social isolation (Benson, 2000; Howard-Hamilton & Watt, 2001).

Furthermore, college athletes report experiencing role conflict (Adler & Adler, 1991; Harrison et al., 2009). The level of conflict experienced is a function of (1) alignment between a college athlete's commitment to athletics and/or sport, and (2) actual time and energy spent on sports

and academics. The psychological literature suggests that in the face of internal role conflict, there is a psychological tendency for individuals to move toward resolving discrepancies between attitudes/values/commitments and one's behavior. This phenomenon, called cognitive dissonance leads actors to do one of two things: they can either change their identified values or commitments to match behavior, or change their behavior to match stated commitments (Aronson, 1968; Bem, 1967). Thus, we can infer that college athletes theoretically experience varying degrees of conflict and subsequent dissonance resolution, depending on relative commitment to athletics and/or academics. The *pure athlete*, one who is primarily committed to the athletic role with minimal or no commitment to the academic role (Snyder, 1985), would be least conflicted by an environment of disproportionate high athletic demands. By contrast, the *pure scholar* demonstrates an opposite role identity, and the commitment to the academic role leaves minimal energy for athletics (Snyder, 1985). The ideal balance is reflected by a *scholar athlete*, who has a high degree of commitment to both academics and athletics (Snyder, 1985).

Indeed, the literature clearly documents that college athletes consistently experience identity role conflict throughout their time in college (Adler & Adler, 1991; Harrison et al., 2009; Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2002), suggesting they also experience psychological dissonance. This would especially be the case for pure scholars and scholar athletes within environments with high athletic demands. Yet there is little information on how the athletic department influences this process. Such information is paramount to understanding how educational environments can contribute to resolving dissonance and role conflict among college athletes and improving academic success and graduation rates.

Organizational Culture in Athletics Departments

The experiences of college athletes are, to a significant degree, shaped by the organizational culture of intercollegiate athletic departments. Organizational culture can be difficult to define and measure because it is elusive and multifaceted, and it can vary for individuals and groups (Geertz, 1973; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Kuh & Hall, 1993). Nonetheless, organizational culture is identifiable, as it is embedded in the lives of stakeholder members within organizations and has an incredible influence on their experiences and behaviors (Schein, 2004). Within U.S. higher education, campus culture has been defined as "the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs,

and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups [and] provide a frame of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions on and off campus” (Kuh & Hall, 1993, p. 2). In this section, we review the literature and conceptual frameworks related to organizational culture in order to outline the phenomenon under study, justify a grounded theory approach, and provide supplementary validity of the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Burton Clark’s (1972) influential research demonstrated that organizations, like individuals, employ a distinct set of values and shared beliefs. Whereas individuals strategically (consciously or unconsciously) reveal these values and beliefs in managing how people perceive them, organizations do so by impressing upon the culture. Clark asserted that organizational practices and shared values are often embodied in an “organizational saga,” that is, a collective understanding of a unique accomplishment or figure that is “intrinsically historical but embellished through retelling and rewriting” (p. 178). It can be a powerful mechanism through which new members learn the culture and are brought into alignment with the core values, beliefs, and norms of the organizational culture.

A durable organizational saga “is widely expressed as a generalized tradition in statues and ceremonies, written histories and current catalogues, even in an ‘air about the place’ that is felt by participants and some outsiders” (Clark, 1972, p. 182). According to Clark, durable sagas are generally initiated by strong leaders with a strong knowledge base and a significant degree of autonomy within the organization. During the development of a strong saga, leaders attempt to shape the organizational culture through, among other things, the selection of personnel and the establishment of programs and subcultures.

Intercollegiate Athletics Culture

While educational scholars have examined institutional culture (e.g., Kuh & Hall, 1993; Tierney, 1998), few studies have explicitly explored culture within intercollegiate athletic departments. Recently, Schroeder (2010) developed a model for this type of assessment, identifying four primary elements that interact to form a unique athletic department culture: institutional culture, external environment, internal environment, and leadership/power. *Institutional culture*, in Schroeder’s view, is the “starting point for understanding an athletic department’s culture because it establishes cultural parameters” (p. 104). Factors such as the college or university’s mission, institutional type and size, administrative policies, and admissions standards influence perceptions, values, and assumptions about athletic department culture and the behaviors of

department leadership (Duderstadt, 2000). But when colleges and universities distance athletic department facilities from academic departments by positioning them on the periphery of campus, they generally allow athletic leaders (e.g., athletic director, head coach) the autonomy to develop their own culture and to control their own decision-making (Comeaux, 2010; Schroeder, 2010).

The power of the *external environment*—such as the media, professional sports leagues, corporate sponsors, and governing bodies (e.g., NCAA)—can (and do) penetrate the core of an athletic department and affect its values and assumptions. Schroeder (2010) asserted that “the millions of dollars that can be gleaned from media, sponsors, boosters, and post-season appearances can entice leaders into making changes that are inconsistent with department assumptions” (p. 104). At the same time, the *internal environment* might be the most visible element of the intercollegiate athletic department culture, epitomized by mascots, logos, slogans, written documents, buildings, cheers, rituals, and ceremonies. These types of artifacts are in fact designed with the intent to convey certain implicit and explicit messages, and to promote specific behaviors among various stakeholders within intercollegiate athletic departments.

An ongoing assessment of *leadership and power* dynamics, according to Schroeder, is essential to understanding and managing the athletic department culture. Athletic leadership must maintain a proper cultural balance between the institution, athletic department, and external environment and, as such, Schroeder revealed three key points: (1) the source of leadership must be well-defined; (2) leadership must acknowledge the uniqueness of how decisions are made and communicated; and (3) leadership must embody the values and assumption of the desired culture. In all, Schroeder’s model is a useful tool for framing our data collection process and for interpreting the findings from the athletic departmental context and participants that inform this study.

While this study focuses on the idealized image of the athlete within U.S. higher education, as shaped by the culture of the athletic department, it is important to note the cultural forces we hone in on are themselves shaped by larger institutional culture and external environments. In particular, this study is situated within an academically prestigious institutional environment and culture. Furthermore, beyond the institution, the culture of the athletic department, as noted in the literature review, is shaped by a variety of external factors (e.g., television networks, NCAA, boosters, alumni). For example, the NCAA supports commercial policies that shape the athletic department operations and that may or may not be consistent with the academic values of U.S.

higher education (Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008). We refer the reader to other works for a more thorough explanation of how these external forces shape athlete experiences (e.g., Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Clotfelter, 2011; Comeaux, 2015; Duderstadt, 2000; Noll, 2004; Toma, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

Initiatives to support college athletes create compatible and affirming identities as both students and athletes remain an ongoing challenge. A myriad of studies have been done to explore the lives of athletes, yet a chasm remains in our understanding of how their experiences are shaped by the organizational culture of and socialization by their institutions' athletic department. Using a combined case study and grounded theory approach, we explored the culture of an athletic department at a Division I university. We specifically looked at the extent to which the culture shaped the experiences of athletes in the revenue-generating sport of football, where graduation rates are especially low (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Southall, Eckard, Nagel, & Hale, 2012).

Drawing on relevant documents, observational data, and interviews with key stakeholders in the affairs of intercollegiate athletics, we describe the development of a student/athlete dual identity within a particular organizational culture. We sought to illuminate the dual role of student and athlete that the literature says can influence the quality of educational experiences for athletes. More specifically, we explored the dissonance experienced by athletes who strive to focus on academics despite overwhelming sport demands, to better understand the role that the organizational culture played in shaping the negotiation of this balance. We were guided by the following overarching research question:

What role does the organizational culture play in shaping college athletes' academic success via influencing role conflict and resolution?

Method

We employed elements of grounded theory and case study methodology to address our research questions (Corbin & Strauss 1990). A grounded theory approach allowed the issues to emerge during the research process with minimal preconceived hypotheses (Glaser & Holton, 2004). This also permitted a detailed and systematic method of analysis, as well as an inductive approach. At the same time, the case

study method allowed us to clearly define the boundaries of our research (Corbin & Strauss 2008; Creswell, 1998).

Case Selection

Our research site was a Division I public institution in the western United States where we had access to multiple stakeholders in the affairs of intercollegiate athletics for in-depth interviews. The school participates in a Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) conference. The institution has a history of athletic success and academic prowess, with graduation rates that are higher than the national average for both athletes and the general student population. In addition, the athletic department provides mandated counseling and tutoring services, as well as learning specialists and academic coaches to improve the academic success of college athletes.

The first author was a newcomer and relative outsider to the organization without personal experience as a college athlete. She served as an academic advisor within the athletic department for a six-month period and has research expertise in the area of organizational culture and higher education. The second author was an insider, based on experiential knowledge as a former collegiate athlete in a competitive environment, research expertise as a leading scholar on athletes in U.S. higher education, and knowledge of the athletic department chosen as the study site.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred across a variety of levels within the athletic department using theoretical and purposeful sampling techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For interviews, key stakeholders were asked to provide a list of full-time personnel and football players who could speak directly about their experience. A key stakeholder in the affairs of athletics helped select interview informants from that list and also assisted with the selection of useful athletics-related documents. Additional documents were identified during various interviews.

While serving as an academic adviser in the athletic department, the first author conducted 50 hours of observations over a four-month period, both at an official recruiting event for the football program and in other less structured contexts. This entailed witnessing candid conversations, watching video presentations, and observing displays in the Hall of Fame room. In keeping with a grounded theory approach, a preliminary review and analysis of all data at each level informed and guided subsequent data collection. This allowed us to make modifications during data collection, to develop theory as more details emerged

(Corbin & Strauss 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and to triangulate the findings. We also reviewed numerous documents, including NCAA-required organizational self-study manuals, departmental memos regarding prospective athlete recruits, compliance documents, marketing materials, and other relevant documents related to athletic department planning.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author—five with current athletic department personnel and five with current athletes. Each lasted approximately one hour. The primary purpose of these interviews was to gain sufficient information to guide the in-depth interviews with key informants. The questions focused on the dual roles of student *and* athlete, academic services and programs offered to athletes, the role of head coaches, recruiting process, and athletic department structure. Another goal was to identify one key athlete informant, a college senior or graduated athlete, who began college with a strong academic identification, and could reflect on how personal and organizational experiences influenced his identity through the undergraduate years. In preliminary analysis, Chaz was identified as this key informant by athletic administrators including the academic coach. Thus three in-depth interviews (lasting three hours each) were conducted by the first author to gain a narrative account of the key informant's experiences within the academic department, particularly as related to the process of sense-making along dimensions of athletic versus academic identification during college.

In addition to the three in-depth interviews with the key former athlete informant, the dataset also included seven in-depth interviews with other key informants (three current athletes with strong academic and athletic identities, one current head football coach, one current academic coach³, and one current academic advisor/counselor). Each lasted approximately two hours. These interviews served as our primary source of data. Questions were based on analysis of the semi-structured interviews, as well as athletic department documents, Hall of Fame room observations, and a football recruiting event. The conversations were intentionally focused on the athlete experience (i.e., the “balancing act”), the head coaches' expectations of athletes, and definitions of academic success. Interviews were tape-recorded; verbatim transcripts were given to interviewees, who were asked to review and provide additional comments or clarify points made during the interview.

Data Analysis

The first author initially analyzed the data in an ongoing process guided by a grounded theory approach and constant comparison method

(Corbin & Straus, 2008; Glaser & Straus, 1967). Specifically, ongoing composition and analysis of memos, coding, field notes, and transcripts established initial themes and guided further data collection and analysis. A second phase of data collection and open coding allowed for data collected at different stages to be subjected to the same set of codes in the third and final phase of analysis that established relationships among themes to inform a narrative that addressed the research questions. The second author engaged in a completely separate coding and analysis of the full data, also in phase three. A comparison of themes and matching process resulted in minimal discrepancy and a common narrative.

This triangulation was informed by insider and outsider perspectives. Specifically, the data collection and early analysis benefited from the outsider researcher positionality, since organizational culture is more apparent to newcomers who are not embedded within it (Gundry & Rousseau, 1994). The overall analysis was strengthened by insider insights that led to contextual understanding of both the organization and the broader set of demands it faces. To lend trustworthiness through member checking, analyses were further refined, where necessary, after they were shared with interviewees and key figures in the organization. The key informant's account in particular was read and commented on by the academic coach who was committed to both the athletic organization and his athletes' educational attainment. While this academic coach believed the idealized balance was achievable and offered up Chaz as proof, he did not challenge the accuracy of our data or the counternarrative it supports.

Following a grounded theory approach, the analysis was based on the processes of open, axial, and selected coding to identify emerging patterns and themes from the data (Corbin & Strauss 1990). The constant comparative method was utilized to examine similarities and differences and to draw new meaning (Corbin & Strauss 1990). This systematic approach meant that each researcher, during the open coding process, read and reread informants' responses to get a holistic picture of their answers and to independently identify raw data themes. During this process, we regularly returned to the transcripts to make sure that the raw data themes reflected the informants' accounts. Then, during axial coding, we identified and interpreted major themes, locating commonalities and identifying support for these themes among the responses and across transcripts (Corbin & Strauss 1990). To account for potential biases in analysis, we analyzed major themes separately and discussed minor discrepancies that arose. When we agreed on the final themes, theoretical saturation had been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

We first present an organizational saga, followed by a description of University West's recruiting processes to provide a measure of how strongly academics and athletics are stressed to athlete recruits. We discuss how these organizational aspects affect athletes' maintenance of an idealized image, their recognition of sources of tension, and their understandings of how these tensions may undermine the ideal.

Much of our findings focus on the experiences of one former football player, Chaz, whose story yielded an ideal opportunity to explore the research question guiding the study. When he entered University West, Chaz's academic role superseded the athletic role, but he came to prioritize athletics over academics. If not for a career-ending hip injury, Chaz explained, his academic dreams would have been delayed. Moreover, Chaz has been an advocate for college athletes, and had engaged in a great deal of reflection on the rules, regulations, and realities that impact athletes. Thus, because he was in the midst of a lengthy transition from alignment with institutional and athletic department values and beliefs to the development of a strong critical consciousness about the exploitation of college athletes, Chaz's experiences provided rich data for understanding organizational culture and the college athlete experience in a way that creates space for challenging the dominant narrative about these students. He represented the less common voice among college athletes, and so his narrative offered what critical race theory methodologists call a counterstory. Counterstories are important for understanding marginalized student experiences, and especially for understanding resistance to oppressive structures (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Organizational Saga

In Clark's (1972) foundational work, he explains the significance of an organizational saga in providing insight into and shaping organizational culture. According to Clark, the organization saga is usually rooted in a single man with a mission, and flourishes as it is "embodied in organizational practices and the values of dominant organizational cadres" (p. 178); the saga is a collective understanding, a shared success, and is filled with a sort of magical sentiment. Most importantly, it "presents some rational explanation of how certain means led to certain ends, but it also includes affect that turns a formal place into a beloved institution, to which participants may be passionately devoted" (p. 178). The process of imagining the idealized balance of scholar and athlete at University West starts with the durable saga of Joe, a legend and icon embraced by both insiders and outsiders. While we use the

organizational saga to understand the organizational culture of the athletic department in this study, the saga had broader appeal and recognition that extended not only at the Institutional level but also throughout collegiate athletics nationally.

In the “Hall of Champions,” a mini-museum adjacent to the athletic department at UW, there is a shrine dedicated to Joe, who had unprecedented success as a college athlete and coach. During a visit to the campus, a tour guide explained to a prospective recruit, “Joe really put this school on the map on a worldwide basis.” Notably, despite UW’s reputation as a leading research institution and its many Nobel Prize winners, its national reputation was asserted as primarily being a result of athleticism. The institutional actor’s statement arguably gives elevated status to athletics over academics, and certainly gives Joe an elevated status. Indeed, within the athletic organization and other spaces beyond the university, Joe’s story of executing athletic and academic excellence simultaneously is overtly stated as the goal and as the ideal. The narrative constructed about Joe conveys that he is inspirational, trustworthy, and genuine; furthermore, his own experience as an athlete is conveyed as evidence that one can successfully balance academic *and* athletic prowess.

Recruiting Processes: Creating Ideals and Socializing New Members

Promising high school athletes and their parents are often invited to visit the UW campus. Given that they are also being courted by competing institutions generally, this is the time for the athletic organization to communicate strengths and advantages of membership and to secure a commitment to enroll. During the recruitment process, much of the socialization of prospective athletes into the culture begins, and at this early stage, the notion of balance emerges.

A prominent theme in the commentary during orientation for new recruits and in various interviews with primary stakeholders in the athletic department was messaging or stated commitment of the department’s primary interest in the athlete well-being. For example, the academic coach crafted a very personal speech, addressing the new recruits by their first names. He never talked to them about winning, but rather about doing their best at UW. Other stakeholders who addressed the new recruits that day expressed similar sentiments; one even made reference to Chaz, the former college athlete who he asserted represented the idealized balance—citing that Chaz had a relatively strong athletic career at University West and quite impressively, he used his fifth year football scholarship to enroll in a graduate program.

As they are being recruited, athletes are told that they have control over their academic *and* athletic obligations; and moreover, that the organization supports the prioritizing of academic success. For example, during an orientation with new recruits, the head football coach noted, “We are good academic people . . . Your future really is the job. Don’t think about pro football as being your future.” Throughout his speech, the coach was emphatic and explicit that academics come first and athletics are always second, referring to sports as the “second reason” one would choose to attend college. While touting the superior abilities of University West’s athletes, he acknowledged its global academic reputation. He implored new recruits that “the most important thing that counts is your performance, not only on the football field but in the classroom. Performance is what counts.”

The coach also implied that athletes have a certain level of personal control over whether or not they pursue professional sports careers: “Don’t let an agent tell you that they are going to make you a number one draft choice. You are going to make yourself a number one draft choice.” Indeed, our interviews revealed a common assumption that the pursuit of such a career involves a great deal of personal responsibility from the individual athlete; as the head football coach promised: “If you get up, you go to class, you do the things we ask you to do, you’re gonna get your degree. I can’t promise you you’re gonna play pro football—that’s up to you!” The institution was touted as providing athletes with the structural support necessary for academic success, with an underlying justification for not accepting any institutional responsibility for shaping academic failure. Indeed, some coaches asserted that failing grades are inexcusable given the extensive resources made available to athletes.

During the orientation, the head coach seemingly tried to create a balanced image, somewhere between a caring parent and someone focused on developing his athletes’ talents in both athletics and academics. Families learned how their son would be supported at UW; the head football coach discussed how they ensure that their athletes attend classes and develop athletic skills while avoiding parties, sex, drugs, and alcohol. He noted that athletes have to “be up early, so they’re not going to be up late at night. We keep control of them. They do a great job of being on time and doing the things we ask them to do.” He further explained, “What I try to tell my players is that we are going to make you do what you don’t want to do sometimes, so that you can be what you want to be.” In short, if athletes make the right choices, they can achieve a balance and ultimately succeed in both roles.

Maintaining the Idealized Image

Once a revenue-generating sport athlete joins what is referred to at UW as “The Family,” the idealized notion of simultaneous academic and athletic success pervades the images he sees, the language he hears, and the services that are designed for him. Most importantly, the notion of familial care-taking is disproportionately in the area of academics and creates the illusion that the student is being supported and set-up for achieving academic success. He has formal study halls and goal-directed tutoring sessions; he may also receive other academic support services, for example an assigned academic coach to help with time management and study skills. These types of support services, coupled with state-of-the-art facilities and stated organizational commitment to academics, taken at face value, suggest that the institution is strongly committed to supporting college athletic success. This messaging lends itself to the perception that athletes do poorly in school because of inadequate time management and study skills, rather than the excessive time demand required (whether officially or unofficially) by their sport and of a culture that actually pushes them toward athletics over academics. And these services are framed as an advantage and privilege provided to athletes, presumably to ensure academic success when utilized, rather than as a necessary remediation tool; again placing the onus on students themselves for academic failure or failure to achieve the ideal balance. Thus, academic support services and related messaging are projected as symbols of organizational support toward achieving academic success in addition to athletic advancement—to ultimately achieve the ideal.

There is, however, a common awareness of lower levels of academic preparedness and competitive disadvantage among students who are accepted into UW through the athletic program. Chaz, for example, noted that most college athletes “are about average, and a C is an average grade.” University West’s head football coach echoed a comparable understanding of underpreparedness and low academic expectations; from his perspective, the ideal student is “one who wants to get an education and better himself. And it doesn’t mean he’s going to get an A. It might mean he’s going to get a C. But he’s going to do the best that he can do, to be the best that he can be.” These low expectation were justified from the coach’s perspective, as he describes his excitement in seeing an individual athlete who “maybe wasn’t supposed to get in or wasn’t supposed to have the opportunity” to attend University West and earn his degree.

Notably, there is a mismatch between this description of the athlete’s academic potential and what was stated at orientation and elsewhere:

This more compromised version of an idealized balance reveals that the head coach's gauge of academic success is actually much less stringent than he had previously (more publicly) stated. There is a real and consistent issue of underpreparedness that often puts college athletes at a clear academic disadvantage (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). What is glossed over is the challenge of achieving a successful balance between athletics and academics.

Recognition of the Sources of Implicit Tensions

According to UW's academic coach, the entire recruiting process creates and brings to life a "Magic Kingdom" atmosphere for prospective athletes as it engenders feelings of being in a fairy tale land of ease and prestige. Potential recruits experience a friendly atmosphere where athletes are worshipped, glorified, and even honored in the Hall of Fame when they succeed athletically. Although the head football coach did not identify recruiting in those precise terms, he did, in his orientation talk with prospective recruits, point to the celebrity status that UW athletes experience. In particular, he recommended they anticipate being bombarded by newspaper journalists, discussed through social media, and berated with phone calls during the recruiting process; he warned them not to get entangled in the excitement.

It was clear that the head football coach recognized the demands of being an athlete, though he framed the media, professional football representatives, and personal discipline as the sources of pressure or bad influence toward decreased academic productivity, rather than the demands of the athletic department. Describing the life of an athlete, he said:

They are not just a student. They are an athlete. And just being a student is demanding enough. . . . As an athlete you gotta do the same thing the student does. You might have to work, you have to go to meetings, lift weights, practices, and it's a year round process. It even includes the summer. It's just a very demanding job, if you want to call it that. Because they really are two people, they are a student and they are an athlete. And they both take a lot of time. . . . There are only so many hours in the day and if you don't use your time wisely it is gone, and it's gone forever. You can go out and party all night but it won't do you any good to not study that night or not be prepared for the next morning. There's a time and place for everything, and those student-athletes have to know when to sit down and study, when to do the things they are supposed to do, and when to go out and have their social life, too.

The coach implied that the personal decision to indulge in social activities instead of studying is part of what results in lower academic

achievement. The onus is on the student to manage what the coach described as the unrealistic idea of being two different people. He went on to explain why graduation rates for football players are lower than the school's overall student graduation rates:

The graduation rate is based on a five-year plan, and when a player plays as a freshman, doesn't red-shirt, and he's only taking three classes in a quarter, it is hard to graduate on time. And then they have an opportunity to go play pro football. So instead of graduating on time they prepare themselves for pro football. . . . So [talking about the graduation rates] is a misleading thing. Most of them, eventually, hopefully, will come back and graduate. . . . It is a misleading statistic is what I'm trying to tell you.

There is little evidence to support these claims about graduation rates being misleading. In fact, the NCAA graduation rate measure—the Graduation Success Rate—excludes from its calculation athletes who leave a given school without graduating, but who are in good academic standing (see Southall et al., 2012). Moreover, athletes in football and men's basketball, who are disproportionately African American, continue to show lesser forms of academic success than their nonathlete counterparts (Harper et al., 2013). The head coach's assessment of graduation statistics supports an impression of himself as not contributing to the problem. In fact, he described his players as entirely possessing free choice, and not at all influenced by coaches' demands or organizational pressures toward athletic priorities.

Chaz also demonstrated an awareness of the pervasive desire among athletes to make it to the professional ranks, although he communicated it with a different style and tone. In particular, he was cognizant of the influence of media attention:

From the day you're watching football with your dad and he's in awe of all these superstars on the tube. . . . Then you have a favorite team and then you start playing football . . . you just start to dream. . . don't know how much is from the college system itself . . . but you'll have scouts come to your practice watching other superstars. . . You might be there as a freshman, and you overhear them talking about these guys . . . Right there in your own program you see scouts from the Rams, Raiders, 49ers, talking about other people . . . and you want to be like those people, so what do you do? . . . And you always hear, if you put in the extra work you might be able to get there. That's the common language.

In contrast to Chaz and more in line with the head football coach, the academic coach explicitly pointed to the media, the athletic enterprise,

outside influences, and the temptation to stray from academics as the sources of tension. He explained, “They’ll be sick and won’t go to class, but you can bet they worked out.” He described individual athletes developing low academic expectations for themselves while maintaining athletics as a priority. He believed they were enamored with the idea of playing in the NFL, thanks mostly to influences from the media and professional sports, and all of the attention that comes with being a professional athlete. In his words, athletes have “unrealistic goals of playing in the NFL, and they have everyone telling them they were cheated and short-changed if they don’t make it.”

In a moment of frustration, the academic coach also displayed a genuine understanding of another source of tension: the coaches. As a former college football athlete and coach himself, he chose to voluntarily retire from coaching when he began to feel his colleagues primarily cared about students’ athletic goals and provided too little attention to their success in the classroom. For example, he noted that a coach once told an academic advisor to “make sure [the athlete] stays eligible” to play, as opposed to expressing a desire for the student to succeed academically as an important goal in and of itself. With some hesitation, the academic coach concluded that the administrators and academic services staff seemed to be on the same page but “the coaches might be more focused on athletics.”

Nonetheless, the academic coach maintained that the idealized student/athlete balance is attainable, though difficult. He appeared to be aware of an undergirding tension and saw his role as important to meshing the diverging strains together. For example, given that football and men’s basketball players tend to have both similar precollege backgrounds (e.g., less prepared academically than their athlete counterparts) and sport demands imposed on them (see Eitzen, 2012), he pointed to UW’s organizational saga, talking with great pride about Joe and his almost perfect record of graduating athletes (with only one student having left without a degree). Thus, it was clear he viewed his responsibility as assisting athletes in dealing with the reality of the pressures of being both students *and* athletes. And, similar to Joe, he acknowledged the conflict and believed that something should be done to mitigate it.

Implicit Tensions Undermining the Ideal

According to Chaz, “On the micro level I think this institution is doing a good job.” While he acknowledged there were some “small things they could adjust,” he believed UW was doing well in terms of the resources and support services made available within the athletic organization. He also asserted, however, that “On the macro level [the

athletics department is] not doing anything . . . this institution might say ‘we are so bound, we cannot do anything.’ The NCAA are high and mighty but they are a part of the NCAA . . . a very big part . . . This institution has a lot of power with [members] on the management council.” Here he expressed a frustration toward being complicit in perpetuating what he saw as a larger structural issue associated with the governing body of college athletics.

Chaz noted inconsistencies in UW’s approach to its athletes: “They say academics come first, but the reality is that athletics come first.” More specifically, he explained:

(1) Coach warns us not to get caught up in the hype, but the head coach sat me down and said “We think you are one of those guys that could be an all-American, professional athlete”; (2) Academics are supposed to come first, but classes are scheduled around football/basketball practice; (3) If academics came first, the mandatory red-shirt [i.e., when an athlete is allowed to practice with the team, but is not eligible to play in sanctioned games] would not have been dismantled; rather there would be efforts to reinstate it; and (4) So-called “voluntary” workouts would truly be voluntary and players would only be encouraged to come after studying; there would be no little tricks in place to force attendance (for example, scheduling a mandatory five-minute stretch, in which the weight coach will take roll, before voluntary workout is scheduled to start).

(This quote is presented in numeric list form, by the authors, for ease of readership).

These disparities and tensions appeared to undermine the promotion of the idealized balance; they exemplify the mixed signals that impress upon the lives of athletes.

The athletic organization’s characterization of and belief in the idealized image, already in contention, diminishes as athletes recognize that members of the campus community, including coaches, primarily respect them as athletes and in some cases do not believe in them as students. In a formal interview, an athlete explained that “the athletic department says you are part of the family and that you are both a student and an athlete, but you are there because you are an athlete. They value you because of your athletic ability, and recruiting is proof of all they are willing to do to get you.” Chaz seemed to feel the same way:

Regardless of what they are telling you, physically all of what you do is telling you that you are there for sports, and academics come second. Once you are done being a freshman . . . coach eases up a little, trusts you. But if you

mess up, he'll be back to come get you! . . . You are bound to certain things and other things are more optional. Not only are you bound to those things but there are huge consequences if you don't go. You die a million deaths if you are late to anything . . . I was never late to anything [workouts]. Trust me, you wake up in the middle of the night and check the alarm clock to make sure the current didn't go off. [In contrast], your professor isn't even going to call your name. That's the part when your personal motivation is supposed to kick in . . . But you are tired as hell. . . . You are fatigued!

According to cognitive dissonance theory, when an individual experiences this type of dissonance or discrepancy (i.e., having to decide between two disparate options), he/she will amplify the positive features in the chosen option. The more difficult the choice, the more rationalizing will be necessary to resolve the conflict and enable the individual to feel comfortable with the decision. In the case of the athlete in revenue generating sports, the decision is made for him by the athletic demands that dominate many facets of his collegiate life. This notion is especially salient when an athlete enters University West with a greater commitment to academics than to his sport, as Chaz had.

Chaz recalled a disheartening incident when his Sociology professor handed back the first assignment. Another student began looking at other people's papers to determine about what she could or should have done for a higher grade. When she reached Chaz, he recollected, "I had a good grade, like an A- and she had gotten a B or something . . . She looked at my paper and she said, 'No way, how did you get this? Who gave you this?' And she wasn't even joking. Then she contends, 'How did I get a B if you got an A-? You're a football player, they're just giving you guys A's.' And she went on and on, and she was serious." Chaz was confident in his writing skills when he entered college but nevertheless admitted, "it is hard to continue to hear those kind of things from regular students all the time. You always hear it. Not that severe, but it is there." Indeed, other students also reinforced the idea of college athletes as primarily athletes. As Chaz reported, "Sometimes they'll be joking and they'll say, 'You're not here for class anyway, professors just give you breaks. I know they've got people writing your papers.'" And as Chaz noted, "When you hear stuff like that for over five years, you start to believe it." These campus stereotypes and *athlete micro-aggressions* are consistent with findings from previous research (e.g., Comeaux, 2012; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007).

Another athlete proudly noted he was the first in his family to attend college. He believed that his two goals—graduation and a professional sports career—were equally important, but he admitted that when he

was practicing for thirty hours each week, the academic pursuit was undervalued: "I don't care what they say, you are just too worn out to study as much as you need to." He then paused and candidly admitted, "I honestly care more about football than school." Indeed, when push comes to shove and something has to give, it seems likely that the only possible sacrifice is academics because athletic development is required, almost forced. The structure of the athletics organization works to maximize the athletic role at the expense of academics. Moreover, despite the developments and stated goals of academic support services for athletes, many support centers focus on maintaining academic eligibility, which creates an athletic subculture of low academic expectations (Comeaux, 2010; Hinkle, 1994). Clearly, this creates a tension between intercollegiate athletics and the fundamental educational mission of universities.

Discussion

To date, there has been minimal research focused on understanding the culture of intercollegiate athletic departments. This study explored how the organizational role of an athletic department situated within a Division I institutional context shapes the commitments of athletes. Stakeholders described various elements that form the athletic department culture and likewise influence the experiences and behaviors of college athletes. The various categories that emerged serve as a solid foundation for the development of theory. The combination of case study and grounded theory methodology is a major advantage of this study because it allowed for flexibility and resulted in more validity and reliability of research findings. Likewise, it captured unexpected data and generated an in-depth understanding of a complex process through the convergence and corroboration or confirmation of findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This allowed our informants to shed light on a number of unanticipated issues and contextual factors within and related to the athletic department. To a significant degree this guided the subsequent selection of participants, data collection, and analysis procedures.

This study revealed a cultural disguise and inherent tensions within the studied athletic department. Cultural artifacts such as slogans, facilities, and mascots can convey symbolic messages that have a significant impact on the behaviors and socialization of stakeholders within an organization (Schroeder, 2010). We found that the socialization process and messaging of the athletic department explicitly suggested that athletes have control over athletics and that the academics were going to be the easy part for which they would be given extensive support. This created a logical frame for putting effort into athletics over academics,

masking the reality of degree attainment being a much higher probability than reaching the National Football League.

Furthermore, the head football coach's mixed messages about the school's expectations demonstrate that there is denial of an ongoing role strain between being a student *and* athlete. A supporting organizational sage of Joe, an icon at UW, coupled with such rhetoric of the achievable balance, not only impacts college athletes' role negotiation but, as this study begins to uncover, creates a cultural disguise or cover-up, as we elaborate on in this section.

Based on these findings we assert that there is a cultural cover-up occurring within the athletic department examined and potentially other Division I institutions. Given that this has not been examined within the higher education literature and studies on college athletics, we draw from women's studies scholar, Arlie Hochschild's (1997) notion of the "cultural cover-up," in which an idealized portrayal of an individual as all-achieving in two conflicting roles creates a culture in which the actor feels and seems inadequate. This theoretical contribution provides insight into the findings presented in our study. Specifically, Hochschild unpacks how the image of the idealized working mother sets up many women for disappointment if they are not able to replicate the quality of care provided at home by women of generations past while reaching the pinnacle of success at work. Furthermore, she explained how a cultural cover-up adds pressure and leads to perpetual disillusionment; while these images are offered to be inspirational, when a woman is not able to do it all, they instead become a source of discomfort. Hochschild (1989) noted that the same inspirational and aspirational images implicitly criticize "the frazzled super-mom herself, not her inflexible work schedule, not the crisis in the daycare, not the glacial pace of change . . .," in a world geared towards men (p. 29). This parallels the cultural cover-up that is taking place in college athletics. Similar to the working mother, the idealized image of the college athlete causes these youth to see themselves as inadequate but does not acknowledge the tension and its sources—including unrealistic expectations of the athletic organization, tremendous sport demands imposed by coaches, and misrepresentation concerning one's chances for personal control over becoming a professional athlete. Furthermore, it does not problematize the structural problem created by the institution of college and professional athletics in the U.S., more broadly.

The current study also reveals how institutional actors perpetuate the cultural-cover-up by shifting all responsibility for academics onto the students alone. That is, the various perspectives on the source of the problems in managing implicit tensions, particularly between athletes

and coaches, reveal not only a lack of adequate and honest communication, but also the athletic organization's displacement of accountability. The coaches emphasized personal control and choice, deflecting the pressure of the inherent tension on the athlete. Perhaps as much as an athlete like Chaz invests in being a high-achiever academically, the only solution for him to prioritize academics is to surrender his sport (a move that was actually forced upon Chaz after his injury). According to some coaches at University West, a prudent athlete will make the appropriate use of his time. The organization thus places the onus on the athlete to achieve academic success, without owning the potential impact of the strenuous and time-consuming demands imposed in service of success in sports.

The maintenance of the idealized image and the cultural-cover up exposed in this study are most troubling in considering academically underprepared athletes in Division I sports. In this study, the football coach recognized that underprepared athletes may encounter academic challenges, but appeared to be dismissive of the work involved in remediation and to have low expectations. A qualitative interview study by Benson (2000) focused on "academically at-risk" African American Division I football athletes' academic experiences found that the marginal academic performance of African American athlete participants was influenced by a series of interrelated practices and a culture of low expectations and attitudes by stakeholders (e.g., coaches, academic advisors, faculty, etc.) in academic settings. Specifically, Benson (2000) revealed that the African American participants, throughout their college years, perceived implicit and/or explicit messages that school was not important, that they were intellectually inferior, were not expected to perform well in the classroom, and were not supported and encouraged to be active student learners. These findings point to deficit-minded and potentially racialized perspectives among salient leaders in the athletic department that can further justify a cultural cover-up that places the onus disproportionately on college athletes and hinders the potential for developing structural solutions.

The role of head coaches and institutional reward structures must be placed within the larger context of the business enterprise of intercollegiate athletics—at most Division I colleges and universities they are primarily responsible for delivering winning seasons and securing corporate sponsorship (Duderstadt, 2000; Eitzen, 2012). Moreover, incentives for the strong academic performance of their teams tend to be minuscule in comparison to incentives for winning games, making it much more appealing for coaches to devote considerable time and

energy to recruiting athletes and preparing for games than to ensure the academic success of their athletes (see Eichelberger & Levinson, 2007).

Findings suggest that the aforementioned demands placed on athletes' time and energy influence their attitudes toward academic goals. As a consequence of their sport priorities, athletes generally are pressured to engage in internal negotiations, and inevitably adjust their attitudes about academic goals to reflect their primarily sport-oriented actions. The inordinate amount of time that athletes devote to sport during the season—whether mandatory or simply expected—demonstrates a strong commitment to athletics (Wolverton, 2008). Likewise, the reduced time they allocate to coursework is consistent with the behavior of students who do not prioritize academic obligations and goals. Chaz felt he needed to resolve his inconsistent self-perception, for example, by either challenging the inconsistency or changing his beliefs to match his behavior. He had a primary focus on academics during the first year of college and, after much internal negotiation, it shifted to a greater focus on athletics. Therein lies the potential power and influence of the cultural-cover-up.

Implications for Research and Practice

Over the years, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and others have increasingly stated concerns about the educational experiences of Division I college athletes, perhaps in response to experiences like Chaz's, and to the scholarly and public scrutiny on intercollegiate athletics (Bowen & Levin, 2003). Many critics, for example, have raised awareness about disparaging graduation rates in football and men's basketball, misplaced spending priorities, and the role of leadership (see e.g., Comeaux, 2015; Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010). Ineffective engagement strategies for college athletes' learning exacerbate this concern (Benson, 2000; Comeaux, 2010). As a result, the NCAA enacted the Academic Progress Rate (APR) initiative, a measurement tool that essentially provides an instant snapshot of the eligibility, retention, and graduation of college athletes in team sports (NCAA, 2011). This has led athletic departments to expand their academic facilities for college athletes and to hire more specialized personnel such as life skills and eligibility coordinators (Covell & Barr, 2010). Nonetheless the problem persists and this study sheds light on why.

The present study has limitations that we hope will be addressed in future inquiry. The findings are not intended to be generalizable to all FSB schools, given that we rely on a sample of stakeholders in athletic affairs at a single institution. Beyond the scope of this study but equally important for future research is the role of the athletic enterprise

in shaping the athletic departmental culture and pressures that trickle down to the college athlete in revenue generating sports; it suggests that such an examination should include analysis of and implications for the reward structure. Nonetheless, this study offers insights and explanations into the culture of an athletic department that was not previously available, and thus broadens our understanding of more general issues and leads to additional research questions deserving of inquiry. As well, the participant experiences and perspectives have implications for organizational change.

Prominent colleges and universities have demonstrated that effective academic leadership from their head coaches matters when it comes to shaping a culture of academic excellence and the developmental trajectories of athletes (see Lawrence, Harrison, & Stone, 2009). As Benson (2000) asserts, they would be wise to think about educational innovation and, more precisely, how athletes can maximize opportunities to participate in educationally engaging activities such as student-faculty interaction, nonathlete peer interaction, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, and writing-intensive courses (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). This approach will likely lead to positive gains in learning and a healthier balance between academics and athletics for college athletes (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009). Creating structured and quality academic experiences for athletes can help ensure academic gains within limited time constraints. Most importantly, however, promoting such a balance will inescapably require head coaches, practitioners, and those making management decisions in intercollegiate athletics to shift their focus, to some degree, from athletics to academics.

In particular, there is a need to address the disconnect between the espoused values of institutional figures when it comes to athletics and academics and what they are encouraging through more subtle messages conveyed to athletes in the socialization process. Coaches and key stakeholders in the affairs of intercollegiate athletics can use the results of this grounded theory study to increase awareness of their leadership and power in shaping the organizational culture of their athletic department and the experiences of the athletes they serve. Indeed, athletic leaders in the present study held disparate values, perspectives, and assumptions that only exacerbated the cultural problems.

Institutionalizing support for an organizational culture that allows for a realistic academic and athletic balance will make these needed changes more likely. As Schroeder's (2010) model suggests, stakeholders such as university presidents can provide such support by hiring and rewarding leadership (in athletic departments) aligned with the desired

departmental culture and the broader academic community. For example, colleges and universities can begin to employ leadership for their athletic departments that is more student-centered and more closely embodies the culture espoused but not followed through by institutional agents in this study. Better understanding and addressing current policy, which allows coaches the discretion to refuse to renew yearly athletic scholarships of athletes who do not fit into their system of play, can also serve to promote institutionalized support.

Overall, this study uncovers a cultural cover-up that must be addressed in order to improve the academic outcomes of college athletes, particularly in revenue-generating sports, which remain a pressing issue. It challenges the popular narrative that blames college athletes entirely for low graduation rates; instead promoting a more complicated structural view of both the problem and its associated solutions.

Notes

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² We use the term “college athlete” rather than “student-athlete,” except in direct quotes from participants. We believe the term “student-athlete” is redundant. Moreover, NCAA officials have openly acknowledged the term was established to be explicit about athletes being students in order to eliminate the chance that athletic scholarships might lead the courts to view college athletes as employees (see Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

³ Responsibilities primarily include assisting athletes with adjustment to college life by teaching study skills as well as communication and time management skills.

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