

# Organizational Silencing of Subordinates and Its Implications: A Communicative Look at the NCAA

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## **Abstract**

NCAA athletes are placed at the bottom of a hierarchy that renders them incredibly vulnerable to abuse by superiors who misuse their power. In the NCAA environment, superiors are more likely to misuse their power because of the pressure that surrounds their position. Athletes need the system in which they participate in their sport to allow them to report misuse of power and have something done about it. As it stands, NCAA programs can easily brush off claims made by athletes and continue to silence them through their hierarchical structure. Many of the resources currently available to athletes either have a conflict of interest with the institution that the athlete is a part of or are unaware of the reality of the environment an athlete is a part of. Interviews were conducted with current and former NCAA athletes and coaches to gain an understanding of how resources available to athletes could help them learn how to evade harm and demand change. This study found that a third party non profit organization could be a good resource for NCAA athletes because they would not have a conflict of interest with the institution, they could be around the program enough to understand the reality of the environment, and they could help the athletes build a collective voice to advocate for change in the organization.

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# Chapter 1: Background & Rationale

## Introduction

Recently, members of the University of California Berkeley women's soccer team were interviewed by a local Northern California news outlet about their experiences of emotional abuse perpetrated by their coach, Neil McGuire. In these interviews, players describe McGuire as unpredictable and demeaning. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon way to describe a coach of an NCAA program. However, it is uncommon that anyone outside of the program would know this given that athletes are often silenced before they can speak up on a platform of this magnitude. The young women on the Cal soccer team are some of the rare few athletes that are able to make their voices heard when they feel they are in an abusive situation. There are a lot of aspects that go into the functioning of an NCAA program which put an immense amount of pressure on athletes as well as place them in vulnerable positions.

I was a collegiate athlete, and while playing my sport for my school I experienced trauma at the hands of my coach and the resources I was provided did not help me find my voice but instead silenced me further. The trauma I and so many other collegiate athletes endure stems from the power imbalance that athletes are inherently on the lower end of. As an athlete, entering into your freshman year is a huge shock not only because of the daily stresses of being a student athlete but also because you lose your voice and individual power. Therefore, when my coach started to use fitness as punishment, change our practice schedules last minute (any collegiate athlete will know how difficult it is to deal with this), and yell at us for trying to give constructive feedback, I didn't feel like I had anyone or anything to turn to. I was in a constant state of fear and anxiety that crippled my ability to speak up, instead I lived day to day hoping

things would get better. Although there were resources provided by the program, I did not trust that they would not take more away from me. The only reason that I was able to get myself out of the toxic environment was because I finally found someone outside of the university that I trusted who I could talk to. When I described what I was going through out loud I finally understood my experiences for what they were: emotional abuse. Using my voice was the only way I could see things changing, so I gathered the courage to do so. I tried to warn the athletic department of my coaches behavior, but they waved it off given that it was not in the best interest of the institution. Once again I was silenced, but at least I could leave and use my voice elsewhere. No matter the circumstance, an athlete must be able to use their voice at every point in their experiences. If athletes can tell their stories then they can build networks that could have the power to make people listen to the larger message.

The athletes that hold the knowledge of what needs to be done to give athletes a voice have themselves been silenced and need people to speak up for them, until they can themselves, to prevent more abuse from happening in NCAA programs. I am in a unique position because after I left my collegiate sports program I also left the university and since that institution no longer has a hold over my voice, I am able to speak up without fear of retribution. I hope to educate future collegiate athletes about the reality of being a student athlete in the NCAA so that those athletes can pass it onto the next class and so on. Athletes can't learn from each other if they are silenced and because of that no one will learn how to improve things and athletes will continue to be taken advantage of.

The example of the Cal women's soccer team as well as my own experience demonstrate the larger issue of organizations and institutions silencing vulnerable populations. Taking a step back from the NCAA to look at organizational silencing as a whole will help inform how to

approach combating organizational silencing in general which can subsequently be applied to the NCAA and its specific characteristics. Within organizations, hierarchies create power imbalances that people in positions of authority can exploit and use for personal gains. Hodson et. al. (2006) in their study on chaos and abuse of power in the workplace infer that when superiors exploit their power, the possibility for a mutually beneficial relationship between superiors and subordinates disintegrates. Unfortunately, many organizations rely heavily on relationships within organizational hierarchies that are parasitic (one gains while the other suffers) or commensalistic (one gains while the other is neither harmed nor helped). In these situations only a few individuals if not just one individual profits from the structure of the organization by using those in positions of little to no power to achieve their goals. It is the fact that those with limited power are completely complicit to the authority figure(s) that causes a system such as this to continue operating. When subordinates are not able to report their mistreatment to someone who can actually do something about it, they are silenced with little hope of escaping the situation. Residing at the bottom of an organization's hierarchy, subordinates can potentially see the miscommunications in that organization more than a superior and therefore they hold valuable knowledge.

This study will look at how to achieve and maintain a mutualistic relationship between superiors and subordinates in order for the voices of subordinates to be heard and utilized to change the structure of the organization. A mutualistic relationship will still have the superior prospering from the work of the subordinate but the subordinate will also have some personal gain from the interaction. We need to question how organizations can move away from hierarchies of dominance towards hierarchies of respect. Hierarchies of dominance silence those at the bottom and use them for the superiors own personal gain. Hierarchies of respect still

establish positions of power but those at the top do not abuse their power, they use it to help the collective voice of subordinates be heard in order to foster constructive communities. If done properly, the organization will prosper from having vulnerable populations heard because they can input their advice about how to improve operations.

This study will also explore how communicative networks can be built to achieve a collective voice that can invoke action and reform. A communicative network is necessary for subordinates to have their voice(s) heard because, as evidenced by many examples of unions, a collection of voices will be heard much louder than an individual's voice. Once the collective voice is heard, the process of actually invoking change can occur, which will also require the input of the collective voice. We need to explore how to best effect change that considers the experiences of the subordinates who understand how the system makes people vulnerable to abuse and silencing. If the organization is adapted to support mutualistic relationships between superiors and subordinates then another challenge comes in maintaining this relationship. As individuals can find ways to achieve more personal gain at the cost of others, we need to find ways to maintain the protection of athletes over all else.

Further, we need to understand how to balance the power of a superior so that subordinates may have a voice and use it to improve the organization. Those with power in hierarchies are free to use their power as they see fit, which leaves subordinates in harmful positions. Gavin (2010) in her study on the effects of emotional abuse defines emotional abuse as “any kind of abuse that is psychological rather than physical in nature, including verbal abuse, constant criticism, intimidation, manipulation, and a refusal to be pleased.” Emotional abuse has lasting effects on individuals, as Gavin (2010) states, “it can erode self-confidence, sense of self-worth, and self-concept. It is insidious, as perpetrators might disguise it as advice or



guidance, but constant berating and belittling leads to the loss of personal value, leaving victims with deep and long-lasting (although invisible) scars.” These long lasting scars are why we need to make sure that athletes' voices can be heard, we listen to them and change what needs to be changed. We need to study how athletes can have power in their organization through their voices so that we can prevent athletes from further harm as well as stop it from happening altogether for future collegiate athletes.

## **NCAA Background**

To get a better sense of why athletes are so vulnerable in the NCAA it would be good to understand how the NCAA is structured. The NCAA organization consists of a governing body that “is composed of institutional chief executive officers that oversee Association-wide issues. The board is charged with ensuring that each division operates consistently with the basic purposes, fundamental policies and general principles of the Association” (NCAA). Although the NCAA is a member-led organization, there are 500 employees who work at their headquarters office to facilitate the directives of different committees (NCAA). The members that make up such committees could be college presidents, athletic directors, faculty athletics representatives, compliance officers, conference staff, academic support staff, coaches, sports information directors, or health and safety personnel (NCAA).

Within each division of the NCAA (Division I, Division II, and Division III), there is the same general hierarchy. Starting at the top are the heads of the institution, like a university president. Then the highest rank within the athletic department are the athletic directors (usually there is one main one and then a few associate athletic directors). Following them are coaches, obviously, the head coach precedes the assistant and volunteer coaches. The next tier are

individuals who work within each program to bolster the overall experience for athletes, such as, athletic trainers, academic advisors, sports psychologists, etc. Lastly, resting at the bottom are the student athletes. The structure of this hierarchy should be noted for its placement of individuals supposedly aiming to help student athletes (athletics trainers, academic advisors, sports psychologists etc.) as holding more power than the athletes themselves. This makes speaking up as a subordinate more difficult because those that could help the athletes could also harm them by using the power that they have over athletes. Other organizations may have this strange ranking of power as well, but collegiate athletics produces a uniquely vulnerable environment for abuse and silencing.

To move forward in understanding how to help athletes have a voice in the NCAA, we first need to know how collegiate athletics produces a uniquely vulnerable environment for abuse and silencing. First, athletes entering into the NCAA are naïve about what the reality of their role will be. Second, student athletes lack experience in standing up to superiors within athletics prior to college sports. Third, the nature of resources available to student athletes creates a conflict of interest with the institution. Fourth, universities legally obligate athletes via scholarships. These aspects of an athletes role in the NCAA that create vulnerabilities make athletes more susceptible to be silenced by their superiors. Without the voices of athletes enduring abuse we do not know how to fix what is contributing to that abuse, therefore, we need to find ways to have their voices heard.

What I mean by student athletes being naïve prior to joining a collegiate team is their general nature to glamorize what an NCAA program will encompass. This glamorization has been enforced through outside sources, including NCAA coaches who as part of their job use persuasion tactics to get athletes to commit to their program. Since coaches are often kind and

compassionate in the process of recruiting an athlete, athletes don't always get the full picture of what being a part of that program may entail. Student athletes currently in the program, if they are having a bad experience, are often kept from voicing the truth for fear of the information influencing potential new recruits negatively. A bridge needs to be built to close the divide between the expectations an athlete coming into college has and the knowledge that current athletes have of what it is truly like. The lack of knowledge athletes have of collegiate sports and how a specific program functions makes them vulnerable. This naïvety could ultimately lead an athlete to be unprepared for the experiences they will have which, as I will explain next, can lead to them being silenced.

As Deutsch & Jones (2008) found in their study on respect and authority in adult-youth relationships, "respect, as a bidirectional trait, has been identified by youth as an important component of their identities and experiences in after-school programs." Similarly, for the entirety of an athlete's youth career, they are taught to respect the authority of their coach without question. Athletes often have no reason to need to know how to stand up to their coaches' power, in fact, sports organizations and parents discourage such behavior. Parents provide inherent checks and balances on the coaches' behavior since some are usually around to observe practices and competitions. However, in the NCAA, given that an athlete's parent does not move to college with them, suddenly this aspect of accountability for coaches disappears, along with the athlete's biggest support system (obviously, not every athlete has a supportive relationship with a parent, but that is a completely different issue). If a superior in the NCAA abuses their power, student athletes are far from equipped to know how to protect themselves making them extremely vulnerable to being silenced by their superiors.

Often the athletic departments and universities control the resources that student athletes need in order to survive the abuse from the same program/institution. Therefore, if an athlete seeks help in finding their voice against the abusive power of a superior, the individual who could help them could just as easily harm them due to their conflicts of interest. These individuals are employed by the institution in which the athlete may wish to make complaints about. Their loyalties could potentially force them to utilize the information shared with them by student athletes for their own personal gain. Athletes stay silent for fear of being retaliated against and possibly losing the sport they love.

In Division I and Division II programs, there is also the consideration of scholarships having legal and emotional hold over athletes (Division III does not offer athletic scholarships). Not only do athletes stay silent for fear of being retaliated against athletically and emotionally but they also stay silent for fear of being retaliated against financially. Different athletes have different levels of need for their scholarship money which make leaving a program harder than staying in an abusive situation. If an athlete does try to leave the abusive environment, they risk losing everything they have worked for athletically as well as access to an education.

When an athlete signs a contract regarding their scholarship, they become the property of the institution and are subject to functionality or dysfunctionality of its hierarchy. Scholarships are meant to help athletes be able to play their sport but as they are structured they can actually make the athlete suffer and/or be silenced. Maintaining access to an education will almost always outweigh the benefits of speaking up against a superior who holds the ability to take that access away. Since athletes do stay silent for the sake of their scholarship, among other reasons, the public, including young athletes aspiring to play college sports, will not know the extent of this

problem, or that it even exists. For the sake of young athletes across America, we need to figure out how NCAA athletes can spread the word about these issues.

With so much stress falling on individual athletes, they need help to guide them through the process of collegiate sports. Therefore, resources without a conflict of interest and with the protection and safety of athletes at its core need to be available for an athlete to use their voice otherwise they have to continue to endure their abuse without hope of having their voices heard. The only reason that the Cal women's soccer players had their story heard was because some of the players communicated with each other and formed a collective voice to report abuse from the coach, rather than remaining separate and divided as individuals. However, this does not happen often because coaches can use tactics to keep athletes divided, not trusting each other and make it risky for them to talk to each other, thus silencing them before they can build communicative networks and create solidarity. Many of the Cal players joined forces after leaving the program since they did not want to risk retribution for speaking out while still in the abusive situation. We need to find a way to help athletes develop a collective voice before they are forced to leave the sport that they love.

## **Preview of Study**

Having explained the background of these issues and provided a rationale for my project, in chapter 2 I will review previous literature on how organizational hierarchies are structured to compare them to the NCAA. This section will also look at what implications using individuals power in a hierarchy has on the organization. Next, I'll look at how cultures of fear are created, how they silence subordinates and what implications that has on them. This section will deal with the inability to have upward communication when organizations are stuck in a culture of

fear that spirals into fear paralysis for subordinates. Lastly, I will look at previous research on how subordinates have been able to form, use and maintain their collective voice. This section will focus largely on how communicative networks have worked to help vulnerable populations in hierarchies find a voice. The information gained from these previous studies will help to provide a conceptual foundation for my empirical investigation.

In chapter 3 I describe the research methodology for my investigation. This is a qualitative study done through interviews with NCAA athletes and coaches that I found by using my past NCAA connections and snowball sampling. Chapter 4 will showcase my findings from the interviews through a set of themes which I developed through axial coding. There are two main themes, the first discusses the types of hierarchies that are found in the NCAA and the second discusses what resource options are available for athletes trying to cultivate voice. These two themes help point the study in the direction of understanding how to help athletes escape being silenced in the NCAA and use their voice to affect change. Finally, chapter 5 will discuss how my findings contribute to the understanding of organizational silencing and how to help subordinates be heard despite the structure of the system.

Before embarking on my own empirical study, in chapter 2, I need to gather information on how organizational hierarchies function so that I can relate this to the NCAA and look at how these differences may alter how I approach my research. Then I'll look at how cultures of fear lead subordinates to being silenced in order to further develop the understanding of what is needed to combat cultures of fear and silence. We also need to learn more about what factors into subordinates trying to cultivate voice within their organizations. This will inform how I approach my research on developing resources to help athletes cultivate voice.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Past research has examined how organizational silencing is able to take place in general as well as what to change about an organization to give voice to subordinates. However, there has been little to no research about how this translates in the NCAA, and why there might be some difference within this organization that changes how to go about giving athletes a voice.

In this literature review I will first evaluate research about how hierarchies within organizations function in order to better understand the roles that individuals play in them. It is important to understand how organizations and institutions operate as well as understanding who benefits from it and who does not. This will help us comprehend how the NCAA system functions and what roles different groups of people play within its hierarchy. If we understand this then we can take a deeper look at how people in these different roles communicate with one another in order to guide the communication in the direction of change in the future. Moreover, I will look at how the NCAA compares to other organizations and how student athletes compare to other vulnerable populations in organizations. Then I will survey research about how cultures of fear are created based on our understanding of hierarchy. This will lead into why subordinates within hierarchies stay silent when faced with superiors who abuse their power. Understanding why athletes are not able to utilize upward communication to their superiors will help us look for other ways that communication can help athletes be heard. Lastly, I will evaluate research about how vulnerable populations can find their voice in organizations. This will inform how student athletes should utilize resources in order to help them find their voice and use it throughout their experiences. This research of past literature will give me the necessary foundation to further develop how organizational silencing is able to occur in the NCAA and thus how to go about combating it through a collective voice of subordinates.



## **Organizational Hierarchies in Relation to the NCAA**

This section of past research will contribute to the foundation that my study will build off of because to assess the hierarchies that athletes who I will interview experience I need to understand how hierarchies benefit some people and suppress others. Hierarchies are “system[s] in which the members of an organization or society are ranked according to their status or authority. Hierarchical differences create unequal relationships between individuals and groups of people” (Child 2019). Given how organizations and institutions are structured they often have some type of hierarchy in order to be effective. These hierarchies are created through policy as well as communication between individuals within it. Formal hierarchies are clearly understood rules and policies that designate levels of power to people in an organization. However, there are also informal hierarchies where “those in higher-level groups may enjoy greater influence due to the acknowledgement by others of their perceived superiority status in respect of expertise, moral conduct or similar criteria” (Child 2019). Hierarchies can be both positive and negative based on how they are utilized. Child (2019) found that they are positive because they can enhance the effort of the collective by offering structure. However, Child (2019) also found that they can create disparities in its allocation of power for different social identities.

There are effective and ineffective ways to utilize a hierarchy and the power that it gives to some. Previous research by Vredenburg & Brender (1998) on hierarchical abuse of power states that “power represents the currency in organizations that allows individuals and groups to gratify needs and attain goals.” People crave power because it can help them achieve goals the way that they want to. Power and control provide the means for achieving an end, sometimes at the cost of other individuals. The issue is that those with power often do not have many checks and balances on their actions, which can allow them to abuse their power and harm others. When

the power of one or a few individuals outranks that of the people who presumably could speak up about abuse of power, the power of accountability is lost.

Hodson et. al. (2006) state in their research on workplace bullying that “weak and vulnerable individuals and populations are the most likely targets of aggressive behavior.” Individuals with power often use it on those that have to obey given their own status. Ultimate power ensures that if vulnerable populations do not like being dominated they cannot speak up because it would be their word against that of the ultimate authority.

Vredenburg & Brender (1998) add that individuals in power often abuse it “because of its importance in affecting action and acquiring rewards, its status as a valued resource, and its provision of autonomy.” Similarly, in terms of the NCAA, individuals at the top of the hierarchy often abuse their power to try to acquire rewards in the form of winning games, matches, meets, etc. These individuals need to win in order to maintain their position in the hierarchy, which they are motivated to do for personal financial reasons. The vulnerable population that is student athletes are subject to the power of those who need these rewards and whatever ways they mean to achieve them.

Within organizations there is research being conducted on how to improve the functioning of hierarchies ((Child 2019), (Vredenburg & Brender 1998) & (Hodson et. al. 2006)) so that vulnerable groups are not taken advantage of and can enjoy their position to a degree. If they do not, there are often ways to leave the organization. In the NCAA, student athletes are most often stuck in their position. The options are to stay in their respective program, transfer to a different one and take a gamble on if it will be any different, or leave the sport entirely. The NCAA creates an altogether different level of hierarchy that quite possibly suppresses vulnerable populations more than most other organizations.

## **Cultures of Fear and Implications of Silence for Subordinates**

In addition to understanding how organizational hierarchies are structured and how they set the tone for the culture of an organization, we also need to establish what we know about cultures of fear, how they silence subordinates and what that means for them in order to develop a stronger foundation for investigating student athlete experiences. Previous research by Kish-Gephart, et. al. (2009) on fear and silence in the workplace shows us how fear can create situations within organizational hierarchies where silence feels like the only option. The need to stay silent comes from not wanting to let go of the rewards of the environment. For NCAA athletes the reward is playing the sport that they love at the highest level, and for most athletes staying silent is worth this reward. Not to mention, “fear-based silence has its roots in a lifetime of implicit and explicit messages that challenging authority is unsafe” (Kish-Gephart, et. al. 2009). Athletes have learned their entire careers to obey their superiors, yet their superiors have never had as much unchecked power as they do in the NCAA. Stirling & Kerr (2009) say that an athlete experiences abuse the most at the highest levels of sport since the coach is the most powerful at this stage. They also add that the power that a coach has in the NCAA is the mechanism for being able to dominate over their athletes (Stirling & Kerr 2009). In youth sports, an athlete has advocates like their parents who often monitor the coaches actions, but in the NCAA an athlete is largely alone, especially when they first join the program. Placing athletes at the bottom of the hierarchy leaves them extremely vulnerable to the power of their superiors and ultimately ensures their silence.

Cultures of fear can cause a lot of issues for the individual as well as the functioning of the organization. Keegan (2015) states that fear has “impacts on our confidence and on how we make decisions, and can distort our decision-making. It influences the way we talk, how we hold

ourselves, what we say and the way we say it.” Individuals can become overwhelmed with fear to the point where it dictates their entire lives. If multiple individuals who hold key roles in the functioning of an organization are all in a state of fear paralysis, the organization they are a part of will not be able to operate effectively. Keegan (2015) also found that when cultures of fear come about “senior managers may introduce *greater* controls and *more* performance measurement within the organization, which can set up a spiralling cycle of fear and paralysis.” When individuals with power feel their power is threatened one response is to unconsciously incite more fear in order to try and gain more control. Moreover, “speaking up to someone in a position of authority at work – even with unthreatening content – is often tacitly understood by people as challenging the authority rather than merely asking questions or suggesting an improvement” (Kish-Gephart, et. al. 2009). Therefore, subordinates often stay silent for fear of threatening the superiors power and facing further consequences. At a certain point the level of control and fear can become abusive and the impact on subordinates can be lasting.

Child (2019) in his study of hierarchy noted that “the presence of a hierarchy inhibits free upward communication, especially the communication of criticism or bad news.” Subordinates within organizations are reluctant to speak up about their concerns or criticisms because it is often met with consequences. Milliken et al. (2003) noted that “within hierarchies employees have a general reluctance to pass negative information upwards with the consequence that they minimize or distort such information.” If subordinates cannot relay helpful criticism the chances to improve the organization are limited. Not only is there fear of relaying information altogether, there is also the fear that that information will be interpreted incorrectly or used against them in the future. The concept of retaliation is one of the largest factors at play in keeping student athletes silent in the NCAA. Staudinger (2013-2014) found that many resources

that are made available to student athletes for their mental or physical health are associated with the school which is a conflict of interest. For an athlete in an abusive situation who needs help, finding it within the institution could result in more abuse and silencing. Some athletes are able to find the help they need by turning to those around them, but the athletes who cannot are even more vulnerable.

Morrison & Milliken (2003) found that “in deciding whether or not to speak up about their concerns, it appears that respondents focused on potential negative outcomes or risks that they associated with speaking up, and their responses suggest that the desire to avoid these negative outcomes played an important role in their decisions to remain silent.” Staying silent is a defense mechanism that may feel to athletes like the only way to maintain some control over their situation. It is also a way to ensure that their position on their respective team is not compromised by losing any financial backing through athletic scholarships. Hermandorfer (2015) states that “athlete-whistleblowers do not have a “clearly established” constitutional right to speak out against their coaches nor a property right to renewal of their scholarships. This blind spot in the law leaves many would-be-athlete-whistleblowers in a dilemma: stay silent, or risk losing access to a college education.” Not only does speaking up pose mental and emotional trauma but it can also rip an athlete's career out from under them.

## **Subordinates Forming and Utilizing Their Collective Voice**

Since we have established how hierarchies function, now we can look at how previous research notes subordinates finding ways to gain some power within hierarchies to make changes to them. Child (2019) states that, “although ultimate power typically rests with those at the top of a hierarchy, the exercise of this power can be distributed through a decentralized system of

authority within a network of relationships.” As there are more individuals in the lower levels of hierarchy, there is power to be had in creating a collective voice through communicative networking. Shani & Noumair (2019) found in their research on organizational change and development that, “collective attitude to change emerges from and is driven by interactions between individuals so that social discourse between sets of individuals produces higher level group attitudes.” The process of developing a collective voice cannot be done without communication between the individuals who will form it. It is possible for a collective voice to hold power if it is utilized well. Building relationships among subordinates who have the same goal can be enough to invoke courage in each other to speak up and support one another against a superior's power. In the NCAA, athletes who experience the same things day to day will often have a shared understanding of what it is that should be altered about the program. Agreeing on a message is not likely to be an issue but being able to have that message heard and accepted is an issue.

Clearly, the ideal formation of collective voice would be when a superior creates a culture where listening to subordinates is encouraged. As Johnstone & Ackers (2015) note in their research on finding a voice at work, it seems as though superiors should be motivated to create a culture of support given that it would boost their overall performance as an organization. However, it is when they do not that it may be even more important for these voices to be heard. The process of creating a collective voice has to start at the individual level. Kish-Gephart, et. al. (2009) found that individuals who have had past successful experiences of speaking up will be more likely to speak up despite fear. Kish-Gephart, et. al. (2009) calls this “voice efficacy” and says that if it is achieved individuals will actually feel less fear in situations of dominance and therefore be able to articulate themselves more effectively. Part of preparing to be an NCAA

athlete should involve letting individuals practice speaking up so that if the time comes where their superiors are abusing their power, they will have developed voice efficacy. Someone with voice efficacy could lay the groundwork for a collective voice by offering the channel through which the message can be heard. However, teaching voice efficacy to student athletes is not yet a reality so we need to understand some other ways that subordinates can effect change through their voices.

Zachry & Thralls (2007) from their research on communicative practices in the workplace state that “power is not something that one can ever have; it can only be accomplished through access to interactional resources that allow one to have one’s reality claims accepted as the facts of the matter.” A superior has to constantly choose to hold their power, and they have to continually choose how to use it. Subordinates, if they can get enough people to understand their position, can gain power and effect change in the organization through it. The means by which power can be attained by collective voice may have to be extreme in order to match the power of the superior. Lardier et. al. (2018) found in their research on community coalitions that for subordinates, the “liberating process centers on the “power to do,” bringing to the forefront the need for action-oriented approaches to social change that honor the collective voices of community members.” After power is attained, the structure of the hierarchy can be adjusted to one of respect rather than dominance through an adaptation to the communicative aspects of the original structure of the organization. Subordinates may need help in the process of cultivating community between them and affecting change in the organization.

There is currently very little research on specifically how subordinates should go about using their collective voice to attain a mutualistic relationship with superiors within an organization. In order for the use of collective voice to be successful, it may be helpful to employ

a third party organization to assist with individual and collective goals. Further, there is little research on how subordinates who have successfully cultivated community and achieved a collective voice should maintain a balance of power once it is attained. These shortcomings lead to important questions that guided my subsequent investigation. In particular, how subordinates can not only create a collective voice but use it to effect change within their organizations and subsequently maintain it (**RQ1**). Furthermore, how resources available to subordinates can help them combat institutional silencing, specifically looking at the NCAA (**RQ2**). Given that resources often have a conflict of interest with the institution they are provided in and who they are provided for, understanding how to fund and structure a resource to avoid a conflict of interest will be important as well (**RQ3**). Going into the interviews these questions will help me guide the participants in their individual interviews about their experiences as NCAA athletes and coaches.

## **Research Questions**

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** *How can subordinates within organizational hierarchies have a voice, use it and maintain it?*

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** *How can resources available to vulnerable populations in organizations help them combat institutional silencing?*

**Research Question 3 (RQ3):** *How should resources available to subordinates be funded or structured to ensure there is no conflict of interest with the institution?*



## Chapter 3: Methods

For my empirical investigation I conducted a “basic qualitative study” as described by Merriam & Tisdell (2015). A basic qualitative study’s goal is to “understand how people make sense of their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell 2015). For a study like this, data can be collected in a number of ways, including interviews, which is how I collected it. Merriam & Tisdell (2015) stated that “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate.” Observing the interactions between superiors and subordinates in the NCAA may be interesting, but would require me to infer the feelings behind those interactions. Interviews with those superiors and subordinates will allow me to target the bigger issues underlying their interactions that may not be understood from outside observations.

In this chapter I described the participants that took part in my interview process as well as how I chose them. Then I described the process I underwent to interview each participant, including getting IRB approval. Lastly, I showcased how I analyzed the data collected from the interviews and how I organized this analysis.

### Participants

I utilized my NCAA connections and snowball sampling to find participants to interview that were current and former NCAA student athletes and coaches. I ended up interviewing 18 individuals: 15 athletes and 3 coaches. The participants' identities were kept confidential to protect them from their institutions where they play(ed) or work(ed). Instead I referred to them in the analysis of the data collected by their pseudonyms: Athlete A-O and Coach A-C. The

requirements that I set for the age of participants were that the athletes would be between the ages of 18-25 and coaches would be 25 and older. I set this age limit for athletes because I wanted their experiences to be relatively fresh in their mind and I wanted to ensure that the NCAA was as similar to what it is now than to when the athlete was a part of it.

## **Interview Procedures**

In order to properly and responsibly conduct interviews, I completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol and was approved to move forward in my investigation. The protocol had me create a consent form to send to each participant prior to meeting with them that among other things states that the participants identity will remain confidential with me. The participant would subsequently sign it and email it back to me or share it with me via Google Drive. Once I had consent we could schedule a time to meet. To keep all participants safe and to avoid having to change procedures based on where a participant was located (i.e., different state and county mandates related to COVID-19), all interviews were conducted over Zoom. Interviews were recorded via Zoom as well unless otherwise specified by the participant. Given that these recordings capture a lot of sentence fillers from participants, I will omit them, while maintaining the intended message of the participant. If a participant did not want to be recorded, I took detailed notes asking participants to repeat things more often. Given this difference in data collection, interviews ranged from around 30 minutes to 60 minutes.

I used a person-to-person encounter interview structure to keep each individual's information and identity confidential from other participants. The interviews followed what Merriam & Tisdell (2015) call a semi structured format because most of the questions were

prepared ahead of time but depending on how the conversation progressed were not always asked in the same order.

If the participant was an athlete they would first be asked about whether their general experience as an NCAA athlete was positive or negative and what factors influenced their answer. Given what their answers were I would ask more specific questions to the individual in order to get a better picture of what they experienced as an athlete, especially regarding the power balances or imbalances within their program. Subsequently, I asked whether they felt they had enough resources available to help them through the stresses of being a collegiate athlete. To get a better sense of what these were and what the athletes thought of them I followed this question up by asking what these resources were, and what was most useful to the athletes. Participants were then asked how easy or difficult it was to reach out for help while in the program as well as if they trusted their coach as a resource. Depending on the answer to this question I would ask related questions about how athletes worked to gain a voice within a program or maintain their voice. Lastly, athletes were asked about whether they ever felt they would be retaliated against if they reached out for help (i.e., less playing time, shunning, bullying, etc). This question helped to gear the interview in the direction of talking about the reality of an athlete's position within the NCAA organization. Different questions came up throughout the interview process depending on how the athlete responded to the previous question in order to get answers with more detail. I always ended interviews by asking if the participant knew of anyone else who might like to take part in an interview for the study. About one third of the participants provided more individuals to reach out to with their contact information.

If the participant was a coach they would first be asked about their coaching methods and what they feel is most important and/or effective for them as a coach. Then I asked how they think they are able to create positive environments for athletes as a person of authority in the program, and how much influence this has over the athletes. I asked these questions to get a sense of how coaches can help to lift athletes up rather than silence them. Next, coaches were asked what their opinion was about whether extrinsic or intrinsic motivation was useful for the team, and how they go about trying to invoke one or the other in their athletes. This question was helpful in figuring out how coaches try to get the best out of their athletes. Given that teams consist of vastly different individuals, I asked how the coach approached melding a team together despite personality differences. Creating a collective voice among athletes requires the athletes to get along with each other, so I am interested in how coaches can help this happen. This led me to ask about what happens to athletes that might not meld well with the team and how the coach dealt with guiding them to find their right spot, whether at a different school, or outside of the sport entirely. This question highlights how coaches may deal with an athlete using their voice. Once I felt that I had a grasp on the functioning of the team, and the efforts of the coach I asked a series of questions regarding how they were able to provide resources to their athletes and whether they thought these resources had a conflict of interest that would negatively affect the athlete. Then I asked the coach to brainstorm some ways that they think the NCAA could help provide more assistance for athlete's mental health. I thought it would be interesting to get the perspective of a superior about what resources should be provided to a subordinate. Finally, coaches were asked about the mental health resources they were provided for themselves and if they thought that those needed to be improved if they had any at all. Similarly to the

athlete interviews, I finished the interview by asking if they knew of any other coaches that might like to take part in an interview for the study.

## **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data collected I decided to find common themes from the interviews, which will be discussed in the next chapter. First, following the guide of Merriam & Tisdell (2015), I went through the interview recordings to pull units of data that related to my research questions. Once I had gone through all of the recordings and pulled units of data from each, I compared them to each other to find consistencies or discrepancies. A consistency would signify to me that a theme may emerge, where discrepancies showed me that maybe that unit of data was unrelated to my research questions or wasn't supported enough. When I found a number of consistencies across data, I would group them together and name them something. As Kendellen & Camiré (2019) describe it, this process is called open coding and it helps to sort the data into sub themes that can then fall under the overarching themes found through axial coding. Kendellen & Camiré (2019) state that "in axial coding, the data from open coding [are] reassembled by grouping concepts with a common meaning into categories." This process was repeated until I got to the themes that will be discussed in chapter 4.

Here is an example of this process. I started with these units of data: "our trainer is so much more approachable than our head coach. She has always said that she is a voice for us" (Athlete B), "we would talk to our trainer as if it were a therapy session, but it was hard on the trainer because like five girls a day would cry to her, and she wasn't trained for it, it wasn't her job" (Athlete A), and "our trainer never really spoke up for us, she had a bad relationship with the coach. She would only speak up about physical injuries for individual players" (Athlete E).

These three participants spoke about their athletic trainers in the sense that they were either very helpful in making athletes feel as though they had a voice or they didn't help at all. I also found that some other participants felt the same way about their sports psychologist whether they were used by an individual or as a team. At this point I had the codes, athletic trainer, sports psychologist, and resources for a whole team. Using axial coding I could see that these resources were people within the institution who could potentially be advocates for the athletes, so I called this theme "advocates within the institution". However, it later became clear that this theme was actually a subtheme along with "authority figures" and "third party organizations" that all fell under the overarching theme of "resource options for athletes trying to cultivate voice". As you can see, when I had my subthemes put together they were important issues but were not exactly geared towards the meaning of my study. Once I placed them under the umbrella of the larger theme the meaning of the study came back into the spotlight.

Once I had all of my themes and subthemes organized, I transferred the quotes to a table (Appendix A) where these breakdowns are formatted more clearly. The themes encompass both the experiences of athletes and coaches and will be geared towards improving the NCAA hierarchy for the benefit of both athletes and coaches. These themes will inform what my scholarly contributions will be as well as any practical applications. Hopefully, the findings can be applied not only to the NCAA but to other organizational hierarchies that may also be looking to combat silencing of subordinates. Now that I have laid out how the data will be analyzed, and provided an example of this process, I will go into more depth about what each of these themes and subthemes entails as well as how they apply to my research questions.

## **Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis**

In this chapter I will discuss the themes that emerged from my analysis of the 18 interviews that I conducted. Two main themes emerged from the interviews, which both have some sub-categories and sub-sub-categories. The themes found in the data are aimed to help answer my research questions pertaining to how subordinates are able to have a useful voice in the NCAA, how resources can help them accomplish this, and how those resources should be structured.

### **Theme 1: Types of Hierarchies in NCAA Programs**

From the interviews, it seems that in general there are two types of hierarchies that form within an NCAA program. A hierarchy of dominance or a hierarchy of respect. Athletes report on these two different types of hierarchies to help us understand why they may develop and ultimately if athletes are able to have a say in which hierarchy they are a part of. This theme will also explore which hierarchy may produce more success for a program, which can contribute to the culture of a program.

#### **Hierarchies of Dominance**

As I explained in chapter 1 and 2, the NCAA environment creates an easy path for hierarchies of dominance, and makes it hard to achieve any bit of a mutualistic relationship between superiors and subordinates. A lot of athletes talked about experiences they had as collegiate athletes that proved to them that they had no voice and were often dominated over by their superiors. Athlete F, a female soccer player put it simply, “our coach tells us all the time that we’re replaceable as a way for us to work harder.” Coaches and other superiors can utilize

their position of power to dominate over their athletes through fear tactics. This statement makes an athlete feel as though they hold no meaning or purpose on the team. As Athlete F said, she understands that this is the coaches way of trying to get the athletes to work harder, but it is also a statement to remind the athletes who the boss is. In a hierarchy of dominance, coaches will continuously use statements such as this to try and control subordinates. In this scenario, the coach is plainly stating that if the athlete does not improve they will discard them, meaning the athlete already has no say except through their performance. Statements such as these, when repeated, will make the subordinate unwilling to speak up because they know that whatever they said would not be respected or even listened to. Knowing how a hierarchy of dominance silences athletes will contribute to our understanding of how to give athletes the tools they need to counteract the dominant superiors power.

In hierarchies of dominance, superiors make insufficient efforts to make their athletes feel important, instead they let their power create a dictatorship. Athlete E said, “I’ll never forget the feeling of constantly trying to get positive reinforcement from my coach. I would get so happy if he noticed my work ethic at practice, but I also knew that no matter how hard I tried he wouldn’t give me as much as I needed.” Hierarchies of dominance may get players to work harder, but it is out of fear rather than intrinsic motivation to be the best athlete they can be. At the end of the day, in a hierarchy of dominance, athletes will not perform at their best if their goal is to please their superiors. Athlete N, a female soccer player said, “at the college level, coaches need to learn their players and know how they respond. If they don’t put in the time to do this then they’re not going to succeed.” Superiors need to understand how to cater to the individual subordinate so that they can help them develop individually. Clearly, this takes a lot of effort on the part of the superior and that’s why hierarchies of dominance are so prevalent, they are the



easy way out. If a superior can move away from using their power to dominate over vulnerable populations, they may feel a greater sense of success when it ultimately does translate into the task at hand than if it were accomplished through dominance. However, it is not enough to rely on the superior to decide to use their position of power effectively, that leaves athletes vulnerable to being silenced.

In an environment of dominance, building a collective voice among subordinates is very difficult because superiors use their power to pit individuals against one another. Athlete I said, “starters hung out with starters, if you were on the bench, you were irrelevant. The coaches fed into it too.” Athletics are competitive in nature, but the NCAA can heighten the competitive nature between teammates who each feel the need to impress the coach to keep their spot or advance it. Using communication techniques to bridge the divide between teammates can help guide them to creating a collective voice.

Athletes that experienced hierarchies of dominance either said that they were driven apart from their teammates by the environment of the program or in some instances the athletes decided that they would build relationships with one another in spite of their superiors. The teams that were able to build communicative networks at the subordinate level felt as though they had people to rely on if they wanted to speak up about the treatment they endured. Athlete H, a female soccer player, said, “the best thing about the program was the girls on the team. I think the negative experiences we had made us a lot closer.” A hierarchy of dominance can force subordinates to divide or come together, and if they come together they can create a collective voice. If they then use this collective voice to advocate for change in the program they may be able to start the process of transitioning the program to a hierarchy of respect.

## Hierarchies of Respect

Hierarchies of respect rest on positive relationships between superiors and subordinates within a program. A number of athletes interviewed described their programs as having these kinds of positive relationships. Athlete G, a female golfer, said “our athletic department is very open with the athletes and sharing information with us, we’re extremely lucky.” She describes her program as having open channels of communication where the athlete's feedback is received as much as the superior's message. Athlete G mentioned that she feels lucky to be part of an organization that functions this way because she knows that it is rare, meaning that most programs do utilize a hierarchy of dominance.

Coach A described one of the ways that her program is able to achieve positive communication between superiors and subordinates. She said, “we have a leadership committee in the program where a selected member from each class is a representative and we talk about ways we can help motivate each other, how we can stay connected with one another, and help people in general with the end goal of moving our program forward.” A system such as this allows collective voice among subordinates to form and also allows subordinates to gain respect for their superiors. In turn, superiors will start to understand their subordinates more which will lead them to respect their subordinates as well. Building a relationship with each individual subordinate is important for superiors because it will create positive bonds that will contribute to the overall culture of the program. Athlete J said that “even for the players that didn’t get playing time our coach was always working with them to give them opportunities.” When a superior makes the effort for all individuals to feel a part of the program, the standard will be set high for everyone and the environment of the program will benefit.

Although hierarchies of respect should involve superiors using their power to communicate more, this does not mean they should be any less competitive. There should still be an authoritative relationship where a coach can discipline a player for fair reasons, it should just be to help the athlete become the best they can be. Coach A stated that “if you can get players to want to achieve something on their own without forcing them to do it then it becomes a lot more powerful for them.” Superiors should strive to help subordinates want to make themselves better rather than extrinsically motivate them through fear. In fact, a coach should be passionate enough that sometimes they will be angry or upset, but it should be done in a way where it will invoke passion from the athletes not terrify them. Athlete M attended one university where her coach was extremely passive with her then transferred to a different program where her coach was more vocal. Talking about her new coach, she said, “he demanded things but he was upfront about them, he would tell me what I was doing wrong and he would tell me what I was doing right. I respected him and he respected me.” The ultimate goal in a hierarchy of respect should be for superiors to help athletes be the best they can be and subordinates should be able to help superiors be the best they can be as well.

A hierarchy of respect will allow student athletes to develop their collective voice and will offer them ways to use it to affect change in whatever ways they think are appropriate. The goal should be to develop a program into a hierarchy of respect so that athletes are able to use their position as subordinate to inform their superiors position of power. Hierarchies of respect will often lead an organization to be more successful than that of hierarchies of dominance. Coach A said “when you help athletes develop their gift, continue to encourage that, and help bring people together you can achieve way more on the field than you ever thought of. I’ve seen it happen several times as a player and a coach.” It is worth the effort to build relationships and

respect because it will pay off not only individually but collectively.

## **Theme 2: Resource Options for Athletes Trying to Cultivate Voice**

As an athlete navigates life in collegiate sports, they often need help. This section will look at what options an athlete has for resources to reach out to and what has worked the best in terms of cultivating communicative environments. Exploring these options will narrow the focus onto the aspects of resources that work for athletes using their voice and will help answer my research questions regarding how to structure a resource for athletes in the future.

### **Authority Figures**

#### **Coaches**

In college sports athletes are thrown into enclosed environments where they are at the bottom of the food chain. In situations like these there will be authority figures that dictate how a group will work together and communicate. It is up to this dictator how they use their power which will decide how the organization functions. Athlete K, a female soccer player, said, “if I learned one thing from college soccer, it’s that your coach is always going to have a political agenda.” The role of an athlete in the NCAA is to obey their coach, but there are few regulations on how a coach uses their power.

Athlete O, a male soccer player, described one instance where his coach utilized his power to harm the athletes. He said, “our two captains, who were chosen by the coach, went to the coach and told him that what he was doing was negatively affecting the athletes. For talking out against him, he made us run.” Athlete O and his teammates were punished for speaking up teaching them that they are not welcome to do so in the program. Even the captains, who Athlete

O made sure to mention, were selected by the coach, were unable to get the coach to listen to them. Athletes do not have the ability to use their collective voice if the coach decides not to listen to it.

Coaches can choose to ignore what athletes have to say and they can also use it against them if that is how they choose to use their power. Athlete I, a female soccer player, said, “when you get to the program, you become the coaches property, you're just another pawn on the chess board to move round to try and win. If you're inconsistent, you're inferior, if you're having a bad day, doesn't matter, suppress it, work through it. They might say ‘oh you can talk to me about it’ but then you do and it's weaponized against you.” Athletes often are uncomfortable speaking up to their coaches because they have no way of knowing how their coach will react and they have too much to lose to risk it.

Although the majority of the athletes I interviewed did not think their coaches were a good resource to help them achieve a collective voice, there were a few who felt that their coaches were very supportive and did indeed allow space for their voices to be heard. Athlete G said, “I was injured my sophomore season, and my coaches were really supportive, they made me feel involved still.” When a coach does utilize their position to support their athletes the athletes have a much better experience as a collegiate athlete. Once again, it all depends on factors that cannot be determined by the athlete themselves. This is important to understand because if a resource can help bolster the relationship an athlete or team has with their coach, it may help to influence the overall culture of the team and improve individual experiences. Given that this method will not be reliable enough to help athletes attain a collective voice, we need to find other resources that can.

## **Athletic Directors**

Coaches are the main dictators within an NCAA program because they have the most power that could be used against the athlete as well as the most information about the athlete. Whereas an athletic director may have more structural power than a coach, they are not involved in the day to day practices of a program, so their power cannot harm an athlete as personally. An AD is also usually in charge of multiple athletic programs if not all depending on the size of the university, pulling their focus further away from individual athletes. Athlete O, a male soccer player, said, “we talked to our athletic director about our coach, but the only thing he cared about was the success of our football team, it felt like he could care less about us.” AD’s can be a great support to some programs but not to others, it just depends on how the individual chooses to use their power.

Since AD’s are coaches' superiors, some athletes will report misconduct or mistreatment to them thinking that the AD will help them by using their power to discipline a coach. However, as a number of athletes pointed out, they can easily brush any of these reports off and nothing will change. Athlete H, a female soccer player, went to her AD after leaving her team where she experienced emotional abuse to report her coach in order to try to stop him continuing to harm other athletes. Her AD listened but did not do anything to change the program or reprimand the coach. How an AD utilizes their power can either put a spotlight on an athlete's voice or silence them. Developing a way to hold the AD’s accountable for putting a spotlight on an athletes voice could contribute to athletes using their collective voice to change how a program functions.

Athletes expect that their conversations with their AD’s will be confidential from the coach. Athlete C, a female swimmer, said, “one of our captains went to the athletic director to talk about our coach and the athletic director ended up reporting what the athlete said back to the

coach as well as her name, leaving the athlete extremely vulnerable.” For an athlete in a vulnerable position, it can feel like authority figures are the only people that could change things given their power, so they find the courage to report to them. However, all too often confidentiality is not ensured and an athlete's report on a coach is used against them. Again, finding ways to hold AD's responsible for their favoritism to the institution over individual athletes could potentially get them to open their ears to athletes more.

### **Advocates Within the Institution**

In order for an organization with superiors and subordinates to function well there needs to be a way to balance the power that is held by the superior. Advocates for athletes are important so that an athlete has somewhere to turn to if they need help and are too afraid to speak up directly to the authority figure. If there are no advocates, or the advocates are not trustworthy then there is much more potential for harmful or abusive situations. Finding and analyzing the effectiveness of resources that could act as advocates for athletes within institutions can highlight what aspects should be developed further and what should be reconsidered when considering how to help athletes cultivate voice.

### **Athletic Trainers**

In the process of the interviews it was made clear that in general, athletes do not feel that they can rely on the authority figures within their respective programs (coach, athletic director, etc.) for help. However, some athletes felt as though their athletic trainers were an advocate for them who could vocalize things to the coach on behalf of the athletes. Athlete B, a female soccer player, said, “our trainer is so much more approachable than our head coach. She has always said that she is a voice for us.” An athletic trainer is an outsider within the program who sees and

understands what an athlete is experiencing but could also potentially have the ear of the coach or other superior.

Athlete A said that she and her teammates “would talk to [their] trainer as if it were a therapy session, but it was hard on the trainer because like five girls a day would cry to her, and she wasn’t trained for it, it wasn’t her job.” Trainers' jobs require them to help athletes physically, there is no requirement for mental health counseling. It is up to the trainer to decide if they want to take on that role, and how they will utilize it.

Part of whether an athletic trainer will speak up for athletes or not depends on their relationship with them. Since trainers work with athletes on their physical injuries, “if you have spent more time with the trainer because of an injury, you're probably going to be closer with her” (Athlete F). Athletes who are not injured as often or at all will not have built much of a relationship with their athletic trainer and thus do not feel comfortable utilizing them as a resource. This consideration should be noted because it highlights how this specific resource can alienate some athletes, it is not a resource that works for all and therefore cannot be treated as such.

Some athletic trainers only utilize their position of miniscule power to alert coaches about individual athletes' physical injuries and avoid talking to the coach about what athletes may be experiencing beyond their injuries. Athlete E said, “our trainer never really spoke up for us, she had a bad relationship with the coach. She would only speak up about physical injuries for individual players.” If a trainer doesn’t use their position to advocate for athletes then there are not many other advocate options for the athlete. There are not many individuals within an NCAA program who understand both an athlete's position and how to communicate with a superior to advocate for the subordinates. Trainers are in a unique position because they are at every practice



and every game so they get a front row seat to any abuse of power that may occur. Most other positions within a program are not around the day to day activities of a team as much. This should be considered for the structure of other resources available to athletes because it clearly holds a lot of influence over why athletes choose to utilize athletic trainers as resources.

### **Sports Psychologists**

A number of athletes say that they talked to a sports psychologist provided by the team and found it personally helpful. Athlete K, a female soccer player, said, “I think talking to a sports psychologist could benefit anyone, the same way working out does.” For the athletes that are aware of this resource and utilize it, they report enjoying their overall experience as an athlete despite their authority figures. However, not all NCAA programs have sports psychologists readily available to athletes. Athlete L, a female soccer player, stated, “I didn’t feel like we had any resources for mental health. When I tried to find them, it took a lot of effort and I was disappointed in the result.” Obviously, if the resource is not available then athletes cannot use them as advocates and that puts us back at square one. There are also some athletes who say that they were aware of their programs sports psychologists, but did not feel as though the resource was a good fit for them. Athlete F said, “I went to a psychologist, it was a resource, but I wouldn’t say it was the best resource for me.” Sports psychologists as a resource across the NCAA are inconsistent in how they are offered and what services they provide for an athlete. This resource is also dependent on how the individual athlete meshes with the sports psychologist as a person, which suggests that there should be multiple psychologists with a range of personalities, identities, professional approaches so that athletes can have a greater chance of finding one that works for them. Athletes have to get to know what it is their program offers in

order to understand how to utilize their resources to cultivate voice, there is no single solution that would work for every program.

It is not often that a sports psychologist within a program works with an entire team, they are usually focused on individual counseling. Coach C said, “90% of the work our sports psychologist does is individual. I don’t know anything that goes on in those sessions, it’s completely confidential with the psychologist and the athlete.” A majority of athletes who said they utilized a sports psychologist as a resource reported that they thought their individual counseling was really helpful for them as an athlete and a person. However, the counseling was utilized to help the athlete through bad experiences on their own rather than help them build community to get through it together.

There are a few instances that were mentioned where a sports psychologist worked with a team on the relationships they had with one another or even offered to be their advocate. Athlete C, a female swimmer said, “at one point things got bad with our coach and the sports psychologist decided to be an advocate for us. He wrote down notes of what we talked about in a meeting with him to bring them up with the coach and offer advice on how to change.” In this case, the athletes were aware that the information they were telling their advocate would be told to the coach, and they wanted that but needed someone else to relay the information to decrease the impact of retaliation. Athlete C seemed to appreciate the role that the psychologist took by being their messenger because it took away the personal fear of speaking up from the athletes. However, sports psychologists, if they work with teams as a whole do not often take on the role of being an advocate but instead focus on topics like mindfulness and mental toughness in sport at the request of the coach. Seeing how impactful the sports psychologist that worked with

Athlete C's team was as a resource helping the athletes voices be heard should be considered for other resources available to athletes.

Since sports psychologists are within the athletic department they do not hold very much power in the specific programs to be able to affect much change since their opinions do not necessarily merit reform. Their role could be best utilized by helping athletes to build communicative networks in order to create a collective voice to use in the pursuit of effecting change throughout the program. If a sports psychologist could assist athletes in this way then athletes may build power to be able to gain merit.

In the interviews, athletes were asked which resource that they were provided they thought was most useful for them. Three athletes said their athletic trainer, one athlete said their coach, three athletes said a sports psychologist, four athletes said their teammates, one athlete said they were all helpful, and three athletes said they did not feel as though any were helpful. With such a wide variety of answers, it seems important to have a number of resources available to athletes because they tend to find advocates in different places. Therefore, the more ways we can implement advocates into or outside of the hierarchy of the NCAA will benefit different athletes in different ways. However, whatever resources athletes use should ensure their protection, have an understanding of what it is that that athlete is experiencing, and hold the superiors accountable for their actions. As of now, none of the above resources were able to do all of this, only some.

### **Resources for Subordinates as a Whole**

Unless a sports psychologist works with an entire team, there are rarely resources available for an entire team to develop collective voice. Some programs have implemented specific committees or leadership courses that are supposed to help fill this gap, but these are

often in place at programs that are already functioning as a hierarchy of respect. These programs' specific resources are great to help maintain athletes' collective voice, but for athletes still in a hierarchy of dominance there are not many options to help them build a collective voice. Athlete C said, "I think that having a sports psychologist that was not affiliated with the school come in and work with the whole team would have been helpful so that we could gain trust between each other." Athlete C noted that while she found a sports psychologist helpful, the way the team utilized it could have been improved if it was someone who worked with them on team dynamics instead of focusing on individual athletes. When a sports psychologist works with individual athletes their job requires them to keep the information confidential unless an athlete specifies otherwise. Therefore, the information learned about a program through an athletes individual sessions with a sports psychologist cannot be used to improve the program. Obviously, an athlete needs somewhere like this to go knowing that what they share will not be used against them. However, there is no resource consistently available where an athlete or a group of athletes can go to try and use their voice to improve the organization as well as be protected from retaliation. If a program has found a way to build a resource like the committee mentioned above, it is specifically for that program and likely not available to others.

Since athletes on collegiate teams are brought together from so many different places and have a lot of turnover it will take more effort for them to form a collective voice than a group of subordinates who have worked together for a long time. Therefore, they should have help specifically for building relationships with one another in order to have a communicative network that can be used if any individual feels vulnerable or if the collective thinks of ways to improve the organization as a whole.

## **Third Party Organizations**

Some athletes state that they use their own money to access resources outside of the institution either because they are not available within it or do not make the athlete comfortable. Athletes would rather spend their own money on resources that are completely removed from the university to avoid a conflict of interest. There is clearly a problem if the resources that are being provided are not being used because they are not sufficient or trustworthy. Athletes should not have to pay for their own resources, but they should also not have to be silenced by the resources that are provided for them.

As we have seen with authority figures, a whole team could use their collective voice to speak up to a coach and the coach could respond by punishing them. In order for this to change, athletes need people who can provide checks and balances to a superior's power on their side teaching them how to communicate through their collective voice. A third party organization could provide this to athletes if they were a non-profit focused solely on helping athletes attain balance within their program. The organization cannot be funded by the institution because that would be a conflict of interest which would silence athletes. Athlete C, as I noted before, said that she thought that even though her team had a sports psychologist who worked with them, it would have been better if he was employed outside of the university and was then an independent consultant for the team. A third party needs to be introduced into NCAA programs to offer backup for athletes, they would not interfere in the sport unless they noticed athletes being harmed and would use their power to ensure that athletes voices are heard by superiors within the organization.

Third party's, such as mediators, are often introduced to organizations to deal with conflict, this would be much the same except the goal would be to help the athletes be heard

since they are already at a disadvantage in their role in the organization. The presence of a third party would provide the necessary checks and balances on an authority figure within the program who may choose to abuse their power. It is important to state the organization as a non-profit because their motivations cannot be related to payment from an institution if they are to remain focused on the voices of athletes.

Coach B stated that she thinks athletes need to be educated about the reality of a program prior to them arriving at the program. A third party organization could help an athlete with recruitment, educating athletes about their role in the NCAA, transitioning to collegiate athletics, and creating a collective voice between subordinates once in the program. As a non-profit organization, athletes could have a reliable resource and advocate with them through the entirety of their collegiate career. If an authority figure were ever abusing their power in a program, athletes could call on the non-profit organization to hold the authority figure accountable. There should also be policies introduced to ensure that the word of the third party organization is valued. I believe that introducing an aspect like the media to be a backup to the organization in case a program does not want to listen to them, the story would be shared with the public. Since the organization does not have anything to lose by helping the athletes, they unlike, authority figures or advocates within the institution, can help athletes spark change.

When we step back and look at what's underlying these themes we can see the implications of organizational silencing of subordinates. Programs are often less successful when their hierarchy functions through dominance and athletes are silenced. The NCAA needs to invest or simply allow for ways to help athletes cultivate a collective voice so that we can hear what needs to be fixed in each program then set to work.

In this chapter I used the data I collected through interviews to lay out themes that will inform my own contributions to research on organizational silencing of subordinates. The first theme, types of hierarchies in the NCAA will contribute to my study because it is important to know what the end goal is as well as why a lot of programs are not there yet so we know how to get them there. The next chapter will elaborate on how to go about this in a way that will prioritize the protection of athletes. The second theme, resource options for athletes trying to cultivate voice will contribute to my study because it guides our understanding of what helps or harms a subordinate in the process of using a collective voice to bring about change in an organization. The next chapter will further discuss what resources an athlete should have available to them in this process and how they should use them most effectively.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Summary

The purpose of this project was to look closely at organizational silencing in hierarchies to understand how subordinates may be able to create, utilize and maintain a collective voice with the help of resources to effect change throughout an organization. By looking at organizations in general, I was able to apply what I found to the NCAA while also using the data I gained through interviews of NCAA athletes and coaches to inform not only the improvement of the NCAA but organizations and their resources in general.

I first looked at previous research conducted on the structure of organizational hierarchies to see how the NCAA is similar or different to other organizations. Then I looked at how an organization's structure can lead vulnerable populations to be exploited through fear and silencing. Lastly, I examined previous research about subordinates forming and utilizing a collective voice. The research that already existed regarding these topics served as a background for what I was aiming to achieve by conducting interviews with NCAA athletes and coaches.

Through the interviews, I assessed the experiences of NCAA athletes and coaches and found overarching themes that could inform my study regarding organizational silencing of subordinates, and the resources a subordinate may have to push back against it. The first theme that I deduced was the contrast in types of hierarchies that appear in the NCAA: a hierarchy of dominance and a hierarchy of respect. I found that most programs function in a hierarchy of dominance given the pressure surrounding them, but there are some that are able to function as a hierarchy of respect despite the pressure. Hierarchies of respect often depend on how authority figures choose to use their power rather than how athletes use their collective voice. If athletes



maintain their collective voice in a hierarchy of respect, the program will be more successful because the authority figures allow space for a collective voice. Contrastingly, in a hierarchy of dominance, the collective voice is silenced and the program is less successful.

The second theme looked at the resource options that are available to athletes who may need help using their voice and ultimately a collective voice within a hierarchy. There are three categories of resources available to athletes: authority figures, advocates within the institution, or a third party organization. Authority figures make up the largest percentage of individuals who student athletes can turn to. However, athletes often find themselves turning to others because of the power imbalance between authority figures and themselves.

Advocates within the institution includes athletic trainers, sports psychologists and resources for subordinates as a collective. Athletes often find themselves using advocates within their institutions because they are made to feel that these resources are trustworthy given that they are largely the only option. There is a big difference between each of these resources because of their level of required confidentiality that their position within the organization requires. Athletic trainers are involved in the day to day activities of an NCAA program so athletes often feel as though they can confide in them because they understand the situation. However, athletic trainers are not trained to deal with anything other than physical injuries. Since athletic trainers do not get training in counseling, they are not required to keep information told to them by athletes confidential.

Sports psychologists are a good resource for student athletes because they have to keep the information shared confidential, but they may not understand what an athlete is actually going through given that they do not observe it on the day to day basis. Sports psychologists also usually counsel individuals, and since athletes often request to keep their sessions confidential,

the information cannot be used to build communicative networks between athletes. This kind of resource is important to have for athletes individual use, but there is a need for a collective resource as well. Some athletes reported having a sports psychologist work with the entire team, but the sessions were limited to meditation and mental toughness. Athletes need a resource that will work with the team to build a collective voice as well as ensure their personal protection. Introducing a non-profit third party organization into NCAA programs could allow athletes to turn to resources that could help them use their collective voice within the program while ensuring there is no conflict of interest with the institution that would silence the athletes.

Having done all this I am in a good position to offer ways in which resources should be structured and funded to help athletes create, use, and maintain a collective voice that can be used to change the way an organization's hierarchy functions. In the next section I will explain what contributions have been developed to build off of the research I found in the literature review of chapter 2. This past research considers how organizational hierarchies silence subordinates through cultures of fear as well as how subordinates can have their voices heard by creating a collective voice. My contributions will further explain what resources can help athletes in having their voices heard as well as how athletes should go about the process of creating, using and maintaining their collective voice.

## **Scholarly Contributions**

My study further informs previous research done by Hodson et. al. (2006) and Vredenburg & Brender (1998) about why superiors within organizational hierarchies may be motivated to target subordinates when they abuse their power by detailing how the NCAA as an organization has specifications that make subordinates within the organization even more vulnerable than in other organizations. These specifications relate to the innocence of athletes

prior to collegiate athletics, the lack of experience athletes have standing up to superiors, the conflict of interest that most resources available to athletes possess, and athletic scholarships legally binding athletes to a program. These factors create the perfect storm for superiors to silence subordinates in the NCAA to an extent that is not often seen in other organizations. With this knowledge, I have also taken into consideration how these specifications may require new tactics to allow athletes to use their voice and change the way that the hierarchy functions.

I have built upon previous research by Kish-Gephart et. al. (2009) and Hermandorfer (2015), who studied why subordinates stay silent, by looking at how athletes are able to create, use and maintain a collective voice in an NCAA program. What I found was that athletes need help to learn how to create a communicative network that leads to a collective voice because once in the situation where they would need to form it, it is less likely they will be able to get help that does not have a conflict of interest with the institution which could silence them further. Using a collective voice is very daunting for a lot of athletes because of the power that authority figures hold in the hierarchy, therefore, athletes need advocates within and outside the organization that can act as power balancers and hold the authority figures accountable. Resources outside of the organization will likely be able to do this better because of their lack of ties to those with power in the institution.

Maintaining a collective voice is relatively straightforward if the organization has transitioned to a hierarchy of respect and is held accountable. However, if authority figures only speak of making this transition but their actions do not reflect their words, a collective voice will not hold power for long, if at all. Building off of the research that Staudinger (2013-2014) did on how resources available to athletes have a conflict of interest, I believe that an outside organization could offer the accountability necessary to make sure that a program does make its

transition to a hierarchy of respect and maintains it. If they do not, this outside organization could report the program to either the NCAA or media outlets because the protection of athletes would be at stake. It seems as though the organization would have to have close ties with the NCAA as a mechanism to report programs, otherwise that influence may be lost by the institution who is motivated to keep up appearances for the sake of money. It is possible that the media could also play the role of authority over NCAA programs by using the third party non-profit organization as a news outlet to blow the whistle on any programs that do not let the organization aid athletes in using their collective voice. The National College Players Association (NCPA) has done some incredible work for athletes with a similar setup of using the media as a way to popularize their stories and help athletes understand their rights. However, I think a non profit third party organization needs to be focused more on helping athletes combat organizational silencing rather than expecting athletes to be able to speak up about other issues in the NCAA.

Given what I have found to be true in the NCAA, in the next section I will explore how to apply these findings to the daily lives of athletes who are currently being silenced or will be in the future, to help salvage the experiences they are having or may have and protect the positive power of sport. The practical applications that I suggest implementing in the NCAA could also be developed to pertain to any organization that silences its subordinates, however, specifications of that organization should be taken into consideration.

## **Practical Applications**

There are a few ways that I think my research should be applied to the NCAA which could make all the difference for athletes being silenced. Through my research, it seems that athletes have a great need for education of organizational hierarchies and silencing of

subordinates prior to being a collegiate athlete. Implementing a national program in high school or club sports to educate athletes why their position within the NCAA is vulnerable and how they can utilize their voice to possibly eliminate some of this vulnerability will be vital in altering how athletes experience collegiate sports.

I suggest that this program be administered by the same third party non-profit organization that will help athletes in college maintain their voice. As a non-profit this organization would not be motivated to obscure an athletes reality and therefore will truly understand what an athlete needs to prepare themselves. Given that current and past athletes are the individuals who hold the most knowledge of the reality of the NCAA, I think that they should be the ones to educate incoming athletes. This will also help start to build communicative networks not only within one team but across all NCAA athletes that will help support each other in using their voices. Creating a system where athletes inform other athletes is the best way to make sure that every athlete has an opportunity to use their voice and be heard by those that could benefit from it.

There are a number of aspects that this program should focus on, the first being the education of athletes on what abuse is and what it looks like in the context of the NCAA. This can be achieved through teaching athletes about the characteristics of their role in the NCAA which make them vulnerable and how superiors may exploit them. This could eliminate the vulnerability of being naïve or innocent when entering into collegiate athletics. Some of the other vulnerabilities athletes experience in the NCAA include not understanding how to stand up to their superiors, not understanding how resources available to them can silence them further, and not understanding how a scholarship binds them to an institution legally as well as the implications this has on an athlete. All of these aspects of an individual athletes role in the

NCAA makes them subject to abuse more than in other organizations. Athletes need to know this before they join a program so that they will have more skills in their toolbox if a superior tries to take advantage of these vulnerabilities. Implementing this will save many athletes from the pain of having to figure out how to protect themselves after already being silenced and harmed.

In terms of how to ensure that the non profit third party organization is given credibility and valued by individual programs, I think that the non profit needs to have a security policy for if a superior denies their recommendations. This could come in the form of policies enacted by the NCAA that would require programs to utilize a non profit third party organization and if they didn't the NCAA would suspend their playing privileges or some other form of accountability. However, given how the NCAA has prioritized the success and profit of programs over individual athletes before, I think it would be more realistic to turn our focus to utilizing the media.

Journalists are motivated to find stories that communities will pay attention to and I think that people are interested in hearing the stories of athletes as well as helping them given that athletes provide us entertainment. If athletes use their collective voice to reach out to journalists together, their story is more likely to be heard. Having this mechanism as a backup could put enough pressure on a specific program to reconfigure its organization whether that's with the same superiors or with new ones. For some programs, the pressure of getting the media involved in itself will be enough for superiors to rethink their practices. For those that don't, athletes' voices through the media can gain the attention of enough collective people to call for action at the institutional or even national level.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was limited by the number of interviewees as well as the variety of sports the athletes interviewed competed in. Each sport could potentially have different specifications that would alter how my results should be applied. The study also did not encompass all college sports, but rather based the data from interviews of athletes from some college sports to apply it to NCAA sports in general. It was also limited by the method of collecting data being purely interview based. The interviews were conducted over Zoom due to health and safety regulations for COVID-19 which can limit the extent to which the participant feels comfortable sharing. These limitations lead to the need for future research that takes a deeper look at organizational silencing of subordinates within each NCAA sport. No one experience is the same as another for athletes, and being more specific for each sport can only protect athletes more.

Future research should also entail more observation of hierarchies of respect and how athletes are able to form, utilize and maintain collective voice. Observations of programs that are successful in this will help to inform the entire NCAA as well as organizational hierarchies in general. My study heard from a range of athletes about their specific experiences in the NCAA, but we need more specific information about how each individual program functions to understand how to go about altering it in the best way possible for that specific program.

The implementation of a non-profit third party organization as the main resource for athletes needs to be developed further to provide a detailed plan for the NCAA. I can recommend that a non-profit organization is brought in to consult with athletes and be their advocate, but if the NCAA does not mandate it then it will be on each program to hold themselves accountable, which is not ideal. Future research should understand how to ensure that each program uses an outside non-profit organization as a consultant. I think that examining a non profit third party

organizations use of media as a way to ensure athlete whistleblowers are heard could potentially ensure that specific programs utilize the organization to its fullest potential. However, this needs to be examined further to understand specifically how to build a trustworthy relationship with the media to account for all athletes' stories, otherwise some could potentially still slip through the cracks.

## **Conclusion**

The NCAA as an organization is distinct for the extent to which subordinates within its hierarchy can be exploited. However, as the Cal Women's Soccer team proved, communicative networks between subordinates help athletes form a collective voice and effect change. Educating athletes on how to build relationships among subordinates and give them the correct resource to utilize these relationships will be the key to helping athletes have the best experience in collegiate sports possible and will ultimately create more success for the NCAA. Collegiate sports are an incredible way for athletes to continue their love of their sport and have the backing of an institution in doing so. However, when the role of the institution holds too much power over the individual athletes, the love of the sport gets lost. We need to help shine a light on the instances where power is being abused so that we can fix it and help foster athletes' individuality and creativity again.



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## Appendix A: Themes Table

Theme	Sub-theme	Sub-sub-theme
<p><b>Types of Hierarchies in NCAA Programs</b></p>	<p>Hierarchy of dominance</p>	<p>Athlete’s silenced - opportunities for abuse</p> <p>Organization is not as successful as they could be</p>
	<p>Hierarchy of respect</p>	<p>Mutualistic relationship between superiors and subordinates</p> <p>Organization is more successful</p>
<p><b>Resource Options for Athletes Trying to Cultivate Voice</b></p>	<p>Authority figures</p>	<p>Coaches can use their power as they like</p> <p>Athletic directors not motivated to help individual athletes</p>
	<p>Advocates within the institution</p>	<p>Athletic trainers are in a position to speak up to superiors on behalf of athletes</p> <p>Sports psychologists can help an individual athlete</p> <p>No advocates for helping the student athletes as a whole</p>
	<p>Third party organizations</p>	<p>Protect athletes</p> <p>Help them affect change through communicative networks</p> <p>Non-profit</p>