Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

By
Alexis M. Keating
Dept. of Communication, University of Colorado at Boulder

Defended March 31, 2016

Thesis Advisor
Matthew Koschmann, Department of Communication

Committee Members
Matthew Koschmann, Department of Communication
Cindy White, Department of Communication
Malinda Zarske, Department of Engineering & CU Teach Engineering
# Table of Contents

I. Table of Contents ......................................................................................................................................... 2  

II. Abstract ................................................................................................................................................... 4  

III. Chapter 1: Literature Review & Rationale .............................................................................................. 5  
    - Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 5  
    - Stereotypes ......................................................................................................................................... 6  
    - Identity ............................................................................................................................................... 7  
    - Social Influence of Identity ............................................................................................................. 8  
    - Identity Work .................................................................................................................................. 10  
    - Identity Regulation ....................................................................................................................... 14  
    - Amateurism ....................................................................................................................................... 15  

IV. Chapter 2: Methods ............................................................................................................................... 18  
    - Research Site .................................................................................................................................. 18  
    - Procedure ......................................................................................................................................... 19  
    - Data Analysis ................................................................................................................................... 20  

V. Chapter 3: Findings .................................................................................................................................. 21  
    - Aspiring for the Ideal Student Athlete Identity ............................................................................. 21  
    - Challenging Student Athlete Identity ............................................................................................. 26  
    - Challenging Student Athlete Identity Through Regulation ............................................................ 27  
    - A Contingent Identity ....................................................................................................................... 31  
    - Resistance Through Conformity of Collectivism and Contingent Identity .................................... 34  
    - Influencing Value Structures ............................................................................................................ 35
VI. Chapter 4: Discussion ................................................................. 43
    Scholarly Contributions ............................................................ 43
    Practical Connections ............................................................... 48
    Limitations ............................................................................. 50
    Conclusion ............................................................................. 50

VII. References ........................................................................... 52

VIII. Acknowledgements ............................................................... 53

IX. Appendix A, IRB Approval Letter ............................................... 54

X. Appendix B, Interview Schedule ............................................... 55

XI. Appendix C, Summary of Data Coding Categories ..................... 56

XII. Appendix D, Participants .......................................................... 59
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Abstract

The student athlete identity is one that is heavily influenced by the organization in which student athletes are a part. What makes this organizational regulation unique is the fact that there is organizational regulation occurring within organizational regulation. In other words, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) regulates the identity of the student athlete through each college institution. This identity regulation occurs in many different ways. Through messages and expectations, student athletes aspire to the ideal student athlete — challenging their identity through regulations, contingency, and value structures that favor ideal representation, character and winning. Student athletes across the board strive to achieve the expected student athlete identity, student athletes meet this standard even through resistance and conformity is achieved.

The identity of the student athlete is one that is regulated and maintained through the organization that they are affiliated with. Organizational regulation is very successful for the student athlete identity. Student athletes strive to become ideal student athletes for their organization even when there is the urge to resist.

Keywords: Identity, Identity Work, Identity Regulation, Amateurism, student athlete, organizational communication
Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

As a current student athlete, I have been exposed to the ways in which the student athlete identity is regulated by the athletic department. When I was an incoming freshman I can remember seeing awards on the walls — both academic and athletic — and thinking to myself that I wanted to leave a legacy like that, a legacy that people remember me for. When I started my first year at my institution, there was a picture of a former player for the team that I had just joined. I thought to myself how I wanted to be a person who the athletic department thought so highly of to have on their walls. Today as a fourth year senior, I am one of those people who are on the walls of the athletic department.

This research will explore the college student-athlete identity at a major western university. The student-athlete identity consists of many time-consuming and difficult tasks. The most difficult of these tasks is the amount of work they put in to discover where they belong and how to exist within the athletic organization. College athletics is a large enterprise that exists for college institutions where the identity of “student-athlete” is created. This identity is heavily influenced by the athletic organization itself. The notions of what it means to be a student athlete has led to much controversy and to legal actions. Therefore, it is important to understand how the student-athlete identity is practiced and maintained by an organization. Without the existence of the student-athlete, college athletics would be without a foundation.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

For me the transition to becoming an athlete at CU was difficult. Once the school year started, I had more rules and regulations that I knew what to do with. While I am a bit of a rule follower, I, without question, took on the role of the ideal student-athlete and performed this identity with great pleasure. For many of my fellow student-athletes, this was not so easy.

This project will specifically examine how student-athletes manage the conflicting identities of student and athlete and how they present this identity together. In addition, the project will consider how an organization constructs the notions of what it means to be a student-athlete. In order to better understand the construction of student-athlete today, it is valuable to understand the history of how this term and identity came to be. To examine the process of student-athlete identity development, this project will draw from research on stereotypes, perception, identity management, and identity regulation.

Stereotypes

Much of the previous research that has occurred surrounding the topic of student-athlete has focused on the existing stereotypes of athletes. The outsider view of athletes can challenge the identities of student-athletes and affect the ways in which their identity is regulated and maintained. Thomas Dee (2009) conducted a study in which he researched the effects of stereotype threat on the student athlete. He explains, “Stereotype threat refers to the perceived risk of confirming, through one’s behavior or outcomes, negative stereotypes that are held about one’s social identity. More specifically, its key conjecture is that the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype can create an anxiety that disrupts cognitive performance and influences outcomes and behaviors” (Dee, pp. 173-174). Further research conducted by Thomas Dee examined whether or not stereotypes have a direct effect of student-athlete achievement in the classroom.
Dee (2009) conducted a “framed field experiment” on the stereotype threats of the student-athletes at college and examined whether awareness to the status of athlete leads to an achievement gap. In this study, they examined how females and males responded to stereotypes such as “dumb jock” and found significantly lower test scores for student athletes, especially males. Stereotypes have a direct influence on identity; they serve as a way in which student-athletes perceive their own identities based on how the identity of student-athlete is perceived in society. In addition to individual identity through stereotypes, the student-athlete identity is also impacted through the identity regulation that is achieved by organizations.

Identity

The creation of identity within an organization has become a large topic surrounding study of identity. Andrew Brown (2001) explains that, “The issue of identity is central to our understanding of how individuals relate to the groups and organizations in which they are participants. For Cheney (1991: 9) ‘Contemporary organizations do more than manage issues by inculcating values; they also manage identities’,” (pp.114). The organizations that manage the identity of the student athlete are the institution in which they play their sport as well as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). This creates a unique aspect for the identity management of the student athlete. Not only is it managed by the athletic organizations affiliated with a particular institution but it is as managed through the larger organization of the NCAA, which enforces regulations that the university athletic departments must adhere too.

Identity for this project was analyzed in relation to the organizational in which individuals were a part of. Yueh- Ysen Lin cites Albert and Whetten’s (1985) ideas on identity formation within organizations:
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Albert and Whetten (1985) define organizational identity as a set of statements that organization members perceive to be central, distinctive, and enduring to their organization. The definition reveals three critical criteria: centrality, distinctiveness, and durability. Centrality means that the statement should include features that are important and essential to the organization. Identity as a statement of central characters defines what is important and essential to the organization. (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The criterion of distinctiveness emphasizes that the identity statement should be able to distinguish the organization from others. A distinctive identity statement usually includes organizational ideology, management philosophy, and culture. It helps the organization locate itself in a specific classification. The character of durability emphasizes the enduring nature of organizational identity. It implies that organizational change is difficult to start because the loss of organizational identity will have strong impact on the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). (pp. 803-804).

Identity formation is the result of statements that are important to the organization, distinguish the organization, and organizational consistency. In college athletics, institutions are constantly communicating to their student athletes what is expected of them, how their institution is different from others in recruiting, and due to NCAA regulations there is little room for changes within the organization.

Social Influence on Identity

The term student-athlete was created in the 1950’s after a request for worker’s compensation was filed for lasting injuries due to football. Due to the fact that the student-athlete
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

is socially constructed, this identity must be regulated and maintained informing the student-athlete about what it means and the values that surround the identity. These values inform student-athletes about what it means to be an ideal student athlete. Deetz (1994) explains that as humans, we are vulnerable to social influences provided to us by organizations, “social routines and institutional structures operate for humans much like instincts do for other creatures,” (Deetz, pp.28). Instincts are the informants that creatures have on when to mate, how to hunt, and how to live. Deetz argues then that discourses given to us by organizations function in the same way. We receive information on how to behave and where. Student-athletes are given this information on a daily basis. For example, what is expected and deemed acceptable behavior in the locker room is much different than the behavior that is acceptable when having a sit down dinner with a donor of their particular program. Deetz (1994), compares these social rules to a child who is spoken for by his or her parents:

Institutional control works more like the control seen in a phenomenological account of personal habits or sedimentation. For example, a child might be born into a family where a parent speaks for the child. The child continues the scripted (social recipe) form by marrying a spouse who speaks for him or her, developing particular types of friendships, and becoming involved in a particular type of occupation, (Deetz, p. 29).

Institutional control has the ability to influence the behavior of a person even when they have the ability to choose for themselves.

This influence of socially accepted norms communicated by organizations, has the ability to create tension in one’s identity. According to Wieland (2010), “there is an ongoing tension between crafting a self-identity that is distinct from others and crafting a self-identity that fits in
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

and is socially acceptable” (p.510). For the student athlete these tensions lie in the title they are given upon entry into college athletics of “student athlete.” There are values and expectations of students in college that are contradictory to the values and expectations of being a college athlete. In a study conducted by Wieland (2010), she observes a Swedish Research Institute where the members had the desire to be seen as “good” by conforming with an ideal self, “in this study, we see individuals whose identity work is fueled by desire to construct identities that are socially acceptable, with seemingly less concern for distinctiveness or coherence” (p. 523). Here, the desire to conform to ideal values outweighs being a unique individual.

For those who value being a unique individual, they may attempt resistance as a way to preserve the individual self. According to Ashcraft (2005), “Such conceptual developments imply that everyone who participates in discursive activity engages in control and resistance, sometimes simultaneously, and that participants derive their differential capacities to do so from their fluctuating positions vis-à-vis multiple discourses” (p.72). Simultaneous control and resistance is due to the fact that identities are never concrete and, over the course of time, evolve due to discourses (Ashcraft, 2005). When thinking about the student-athlete, we can apply the idea of control and resistance being independent on the fluidity of a person’s identity. The student-athlete is exposed to many different discourses involving what it means to be a student as well as what it means to be an athlete at this institution. When these two identities are wrapped up into one, they can contradict, as well as complement each other. The student-athlete is also juggling many other identities outside of being a student-athlete. These identities, just to name a few, include being a son/daughter, brother/sister, friend, and roommate. Along with all of these identities come discourses in which help an individual navigate and understand what it means to be “good” at enacting these identities.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Identity Work

How does the student athlete manage their own identity? According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), formation of one’s self-identity is a process at which functions within the everyday routines and discourses that an individual is exposed to (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.626). “The individual, preoccupied with self-identity, can thus be understood as a:

- Self-doubter: identity is viewed as circling around the irreducible, but socially reinforced quality of insecurity and anxiety, undermining identity constructions.
- Struggler: identity is understood as a struggle, at times uphill, enacted in order to construct a self-identity that at least provides a temporal sense of coherence and a reduction of fragmentation and pain.
- Surfer: the subject is viewed as processual and open, meaning that in a dynamic and turbulent world, the moves made between those subject positions offering temporary identities take place without all that much friction or contest between forces and ‘interests’.
- Storyteller: the reflexive construction and reproduction of a narrative of oneself is viewed as a potentially effective way of dealing with the openness and uncertainties of life.
- Strategist: the individual tries to craft a sense of self (collective identification) that is then to be mobilized for the accomplishment of a personal or collective objective.
- Stencil: identity is seen as an effect of the operations of regulatory forces creating a docile and conformist self, eager to replicate the dominant templates for being.
- Soldier: social entities (formal organizations, collectivities), often made appealing through managerial means (e.g. constructions of organizational identities), offer material for self-definition by functioning as sources of identification” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 211-212).
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

“These identities are not only outlined but there are other characteristics of people that are also explained. They are referred to as “individuals’ identity attributes: traits, competencies and values” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 194).

The most relevant of these terms to the student-athlete are surfer and storyteller. A big struggle of the modern student-athlete is to balance and simultaneously perform the identity of student and the identity of athlete. These identities can fall into place perfectly together but they can also create an intersection of uncertainty. This is why the idea of storyteller is also vital to the student-athlete. According to Alvesson (2010), this is associated with an individual person’s “life story” (p.203). Every student-athlete come to the University of Colorado with a story and this story is going to play a role in how, if at all, that person accepts the new discourses that they are exposed to.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) explain how identity regulation, identity work and self-identity, are connected to one another. In a chart, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) explain that “identity regulation prompts identity work, identity work informs identity regulation, identity worker-works self identity, self identity is responsive to identity regulation, and identity regulation is accomplished through self-identity” (pp.627).
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Here we can understand how identity regulation influenced the ways in which an individual performs identity work. Both of these ideas are intertwined and directly affect each other. This background knowledge of identity regulation and how that identity regulation impacts the presumed identity of the self will lay the groundwork in understanding then how the university as an organization influences the management of a student-athlete’s own identity.

While the identity of a person can be influenced and accepted, some of the identity work that goes on surrounding organizations, for some people, is not something that is fully embodied. Here particular identities are not embodied by the person, they are just lived out knowing that it is something that you have to do. In a study explained by Stanley Deetz (1994) he cites a study conducted by Ferguson (1984:53):

…in Ferguson's (1984:53) analysis where a corporate image replaces the "me."

Here is her vivid description of the bureaucratic appropriation of emotion in flight.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

attendance: The flight attendant's smile is like her makeup; it is on her, not of her. The rules about how to feel and how to express feelings are set by management, with the goal of producing passenger contentment. Company manuals give detailed instructions on how to provide a 'sincere' and 'unaffected' facial expression, how to seem 'vivacious but not effervescent'. Emotional laborers are required to take the arts of emotional management and control that characterize the intimate relations of family and friends ... and package them according to the 41 'feeling rules' laid down by the organization (Deetz, 1994 p.40-41).

While there are elements of being a student-athlete that are accepted and embodied, there very well may be aspects of the identity that are only displayed because they are seen as a necessity by the student-athlete.

Previous literature has led to the question of how the student-athlete identity is regulated, maintained and perceived because there has been a lot of discussion around the idea of how student-athletes are perceive and how organizations regulate identity. While there have been discussions surrounding this topic, there has not been enough surrounding how the student-athlete then manages this identity and how identities for the student athlete are constantly contradicting each other, specifically the identities of “student” and “athlete.”

Identity Regulation

Everyday student-athletes are exposed to the ideals and values of the organization in which they represent through their sport. These ideals can be communicated to them through many different mediums including verbal communication, as well as symbols and discourses that exist within the organization. In the area of organizational communication, researchers have
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

considered processes of identity regulation that are implemented within organizations. Organizations utilize techniques in order to influence a certain identity that is then embodied by the student-athlete. Identity regulation as explained by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), is a control tactic that organizations utilize with their employees, “identity regulation encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction” (p. 625). This organizational control can be explained in nine characteristics outlines by Alvesson and Willmott (2002):

1. Defining the person directly
2. Defining a person by defining other
3. Providing a specific vocabulary of motives
4. Explicating morals and values
5. Knowledge and skills
6. Group categorization and affiliation
7. Hierarchical location
8. Establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules of the game
9. Defining the context

These characteristics help to reproduce and legitimize discourses which contribute to identity regulation. In terms of the student-athlete, the language that coaches, and administrators use could influence the ways in which they see their skills, and their role on the team. In the context of Alvesson and Willmott (2002), identity is something that allows individuals to understand what their place is and what is possible for an individual within a certain organization. Much of what the student-athlete does throughout the day revolves around activities that take place in areas that are controlled by the organization such as: study hall, practice, workouts, community
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

service, and meetings, just to name a few. These ideas are useful for this project because it provides a way to examine how the organization influences the identity of the student-athlete. This organizational control is often times seen and studied in the workplace. These ideas can also be attributed to the experience and organizational control of the student-athlete. The most obvious of these being the regulation of amateurism.

Amateurism

One unique element of student-athlete identity regulation is that discussion around the role of athletes on colleges has become a focus of much social debate about amateurism. According to the NCAA, “Amateur competition is a bedrock principle of college athletics and the NCAA. Maintaining amateurism is crucial to preserving an academic environment in which acquiring a quality education is the first priority. In the collegiate model of sports, the young men and women competing on the field or court are students first, athletes second” (NCAA). In order to maintain an amateur status there are pages and pages of regulations that the student-athlete must follow. The student-athlete is not left with much choice to comply to these regulations. Without complying, you are not an amateur; if you are not an amateur then you are not able to play your sport.

The notions of what it means to be an amateur are constantly being challenged by recent research and literature. Gurdus (2000) challenges what it means to be an amateur by expressing that he feels student-athletes should be treated as employees and receive worker’s compensation. He positions the student athlete as an employee of their university because of the revenue that athletes produce for the university, “college athletics are no longer concerned with just winning and losing, but are now also concerned with making a profit. College athletics has become very profitable,' and thus, a business relationship has evolved between colleges and student athletes”
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

(Gurdus, 2000, p.907). Gurdus (2000) states that because the student athlete is utilized to produce revenue that the athlete should be eligible to receive worker’s compensation, which, according to the NCAA, is a violation of amateurism. The very identity in which universities use to justify the “student-athlete” identity is being challenged by many. It is being challenged in a way that creates confusion as to what it means to be an amateur which in turn challenges the identity of the student athlete and the ways in which that identity is regulated by their universities.

Research Questions

RQ1: How does the organization construct, manage, and maintain the notions of student and athlete?

RQ2: How does organizational regulation influence the performativity aspect of the student athlete identity?

Rationale

The identity of the student athlete is one of contradictions, tensions, and influence from the athletic organization. The influences that come from athletic organizations are ones that come from a micro level pertaining to each individual organization as well as the macro level where regulations are put into place by the NCAA. These regulations function in shaping the ways in which student athletes view themselves in terms of other student athletes as well as other students in general. While there are many complexities to this identity, the only layer in which it has been analyzed has been through a lens of controversy. While these controversies are important to be aware of it is also important to understand the identity of the student athlete on a
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

level to which we understand the identities that form within a workplace. Student athletes, like the employees of a company, are the foundation to which college athletics rests upon; without student athletes, there are no college sports. So why then do students continue to willingly participate in an organization which challenges their identity.

Student athletes come from all over the United States and the world to have the chance to further their education while simultaneously participate in the sport that they love. The area of college athletics not only includes that student athletes but also the people who work within the area of college sports. There are individuals who dedicate their lives to serving the needs of the student athlete — whether it be as a coach, academic adviser, or marketing. There are hundreds of people who are working everyday for a college sports organization. Not only do we have the student athletes and staff, but there are also the millions of fans who attend games or tune in on their television to support their teams of choice. When thinking about all the people who are involved and invested in college athletics, it is crucial to understand how the student athletes become the foundation of college athletics.

Chapter 2: Methods

Research Site

My research was conducted at a major western university, specifically within the athletic department of this university. The athletic department consists of approximately 360 student-athletes and 230 full time employees. The research that I conducted included interviews and observations, as well as researching policies and documents that occurred at or near this department. There were three main places where I conducted interviews with my participants: place of work, place of living, and one of the main buildings of the athletic department.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Interviews conducted in the workplace of staff members were all held in the participant’s offices. When conducting these interviews, many of the staff members sat behind desks while I was sitting on the other side of them. These offices were located in two of the main athletic buildings. In these buildings, there are academic centers that house academic advisors’ offices, spaces where tutoring is facilitated and monitored, gyms for physical conditioning, classrooms for leadership development programs, as well as training rooms for sports medicine. Training rooms for sports medicine are where student athletes go to be treated for physical injuries through physical therapy treatments as well as where student athletes are able to see doctors for physical illnesses.

I made the effort to ensure my participants were comfortable with the environment in which I conducted these interviews. I did this for student athlete participants by holding interviews in their places of living — apartments that were walking distance to the main campus of the University — and the academic center in the building of a main athletic facility where many of them spend much of their time outside of their sport. In the apartments of student athletes, they were able to tell me where would be best to conduct the interview. As for the academic center, I was able to reserve private rooms where interviews could be conducted without others seeing or hear what was said.

Procedure

In order to answer the questions that I have proposed about organizational regulation and identity management of student-athletes at the University, I conducted qualitative interviews of student-athletes who currently attend the University as both a student and a participant in a sport as well as current staff and administration at the University. It is important to interview staff and
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

administration for this project because, as workers and representatives of this organization, they are the ones who are translating and enforcing the values and interests of the organization. I conducted a total of 16 interviews, eight staff members and eight student athletes. I made a conscious effort to ensure a diverse set of participants in sport as well age year as an undergraduate; my set of student athletes were engaged in of seven different sports and three different classes.

In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, these interviews will be reported with no identifying characteristics. All identifiers including age, sport, name and institution affiliation will be anonymized. To ensure that the participants knew that this project was going to be anonymous, I asked them to choose their pseudonym.

Not only did I conduct interviews, but I incorporated personal observations of symbols and visual representations. These observations consisted of noting the everyday images such a posters and pictures to which the student-athlete is exposed. As research has proven by authors such as Deetz (1994), the signifiers of what is socially expected are very effective and vital in enforcing organizational values and producing a routine when performing a certain identity.

Policies and documentation are another important resource in conducting my research. There are documents upon documents of rules and regulations that are enforced upon the student-athletes as well as staff. This Universities athletic department, just like all NCAA governed athletic programs, has a compliance department to ensure that all student-athletes and staff abide by the rules set in place. Many of these rules are to guarantee and protect the amateurism of the student-athlete.

Data Analysis
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

After conducting my qualitative interviews, the recorded scripts were transcribed. Next, I coded the interviews to search for common themes that occur between the staff that I interview. These themes reflect the values and the concept of ideal student athlete that are articulated of the organization. After identifying the main values of the organization, I conducted the same analysis for the interviews of the student-athletes. Then, taking the common themes of both sets of interviews, I identified whether or not these values and themes align with each other. This same process occurred during my analysis of symbols and visual representations. These representations are typically chosen by the administrators and employees of the athletic department; therefore, they should directly reflect the values and what it means to be the ideal student-athlete. The policies and documentations give direct evidence of what it means to be the ideal and “accepted” student-athlete of that organization. Many of these regulations also reflect what it means to be an amateur.

This following data seeks to answer how organizations utilize identity regulation and how the student-athlete manages their own identity.

Chapter 3: Findings

Subsequent analysis uncovered multiple themes including aspiring, challenging, resistance and value structure, that were relevant to the ways in which the organization influences the identity of the student athletes as well as how student athletes integrate this new identity. Organizations were able to conduct a certain amount of control of the student athletes through the influence through verbal and nonverbal messages, as well as creating a space of tension between the multiple identities of a student athlete. Verbal messages in this study was direct conversations or comments made by staff members while nonverbal messages included posters, awards displays, and photos on the walls. Student athletes responded to these influences
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

by identifying a value structure that included spoken and unspoken rules to follow, resistance by not resisting, trying to make sense of individualism vs. collectivism. The identity of student athletes has not been one that has been looked at closely in terms of how their identity is created and maintained through the athletic department. This was said best by an interviewee, “It's certainly not a perfect situation, but there's got to be a reason why there's so many international students who come to this country to get an education and play sports at the same time. There's something valuable about that model.”

Aspiring for the ideal student athlete identity

Verbal and nonverbal messages create aspiration for student athletes — aspirations for what they can achieve as a student athlete both academically and athletically. Nonverbal messages that student athletes see in and around their building affiliated with athletics are just as purposeful and intentional as messages that are given verbally to student athletes. These nonverbal messages, just like verbal messages, inform student athletes on what is expected of them by giving them images or ideas of what the ideal student athlete looks like. As stated by Hadley, a staff member of this department, “Everybody here is here to influence you as a student athlete, so we all want to influence you, and in some ways, we all want you to reflect us and the things that we think are important whether it’s academic integrity whether it's on the course; you know, self-reporting if you make a mistake.” Hadley expresses clearly how the identity of the student athlete is one that is greatly influenced upon in order to meet the needs desired by the organization.

The use of verbal and nonverbal messages also allows the athletic department to influence student athlete’s personal identity — offering feedback for student athletes about their
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

performance as a student athlete as well as what is expected of them. Such intentional messages often times function as discourse in exploiting unspoken expectations or regulations of the organization itself, by revealing unspoken rules as a way to regulate what is socially acceptable for the spaces where the student athlete exists. As Deetz (1994) explains, social influences that come from organizations often times function much like instincts do for animals. The messages that were most influential to student athletes are verbal affirmations such as positive reinforcement and encouragement, as well as nonverbal messages that are displayed on the walls of athletic department buildings through things like posters, wall decals, and award displays.

Verbal affirmations of positive reinforcement and encouragement were often times described to me by the student athletes who I interviewed as a positive thing that influenced them in a number of different ways. One student athlete in particular, John, explained in the following dialogue that positive reinforcement is a message that he receives and how that positive reinforcement functions for him,

Messages… most of the time this comes from positive reinforcement, so you have championship recognition dinners, you have people coming up to you saying congratulations, whether it’s academic coordinators or tutors or just people that are like excited and invested in you and they are really happy for how you have done, and so once you do well you want to continue to do well….Yea I think it if it can almost like inflate you, like sense of worth and your confidence in your athletic ability, so it’s like, oh wow, you did really well. You didn’t need to say that and so then it slowly raises your like cockiness, I guess more your confidence, and then it also raises the bar of what is expected of you as well, so to have success that is kind of extended to an expectation.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

For John, positive reinforcement functions as a way that creates a standard for him; once he does well and he is acknowledged for doing well, he wants to continue that pattern. The athletic department in this case creates an environment where student athletes become very aware of what is expected of them. For John, verbal affirmation for his performance as a student athlete makes him want to continue and improve his performance not just for himself but because it is now an expectation. The expectation to win then becomes a part of the social expectation of the organization. This social expectation informs individuals sense of when, where, or how things are expected; they become instinct to us (Deetz, 1994).

Similarly, Bonnie also experiences the influence of verbal as well as nonverbal messages with the result of an increased desire for winning due to seeing herself on a poster that represented her team, “I think for me, it's like I have never experience like my face on a poster or anything like that. It's like a lot of people would treat it really differently within this department, like they praise you in a way which is it so different for me, it actually makes me feel like I'm important, and this is really meaningful and like they're always telling you like we're here to win national championships, and it just makes you feel like what you're doing everyday has a purpose.” For Bonnie, verbal messages from staff and nonverbal messages of seeing herself on a poster coincide with one another and create a place where she feels that what she is doing serves a purpose that she is able to fulfill by winning. Due to the reality that verbal and nonverbal rules of this organization create a mentality where winning is crucial to how you are seen, the organization displays how influential these messages are in establishing social norms or the organization.

Nonverbal messages functioned just as explicitly to a student athlete as messages that they received verbally. Often times the nonverbal messages that are intended for the student
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

athletes are just as intentional as messages that staff members give verbally. Joey, a staff member for this organization explain this:

Those who do come in with the right attitude I think we will not only reward that but we will want to try to use that as the example and publicize that which you can see as you go out here. We put the academic awards on the walls, we put up recognition on the video boards, we want to recognize people who are doing the right things, because there are the people that don’t do the right things and have the wrong attitude. I mean they are not the ones who I mean, they are in the minority, most student athletes of the 350 here are doing the right things the right way and the ones that don’t a lot of times you see them go elsewhere. They fall; they fall away somewhere along the way. They may not stay here four of five years.

The objective to which Joey refers is to show student athletes that if they are not achieving what the organization expects of you, if you are falling behind the rest of your student athlete peers. He also acknowledges the fact that if a student athlete is not ready to live up to these expectations, they most likely will not be participating as a student athlete for the entire four or five years that they have eligibility. These messages are purposeful to show that no matter how difficult being a student athlete may be at times, there are plenty of people who are doing the same thing that are and excelling at it. For student athlete Kirstin, this is how nonverbal messages functioned in influencing her identity and what she sees as possible at this institution. When asked about messages that she receives, Kristin immediately began speaking about different forms of messages such as award displays that influence how she sees herself in this organization. In this excerpt, she is speaking about walls that have photos of student athletes who
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

are achieving things that result in hall of fame status and having their pictures put up on the walls of athletic centers:

    In a way, I sometimes wonder like how do they possibly do it, because sometimes things can be so stressful that you think like I don’t know how it’s possible to balance these two things like well and like be so good at both like academic and athletic. But, at the same time, you look up to those people and say and can think that it is possible, because they have all done it so them it’s almost like you can do it as well.

For Kristin, nonverbal messages helped her to situate herself within the organization. She expresses frustrations about how hard it is to be a student athlete, but, with awards that are on display for everyone to see, she is able to see that achieving both academic and athletic success in this organization is possible.

    In Sara’s experience, the most effective nonverbal messages that she has been exposed to have been quotes on the walls. While awards function for Kristin as the ability to see herself succeeding within the organization, the unspoken message of quotes of the wall function as a reinforcement of identity for Sara. This reinforcement of identity is something that is able to be policed by teammates due to the medium in which the quotes are presented:

    In the training room, there’s one that says, “no whining, no complaining, no excuses,” or something like that and so a lot of times we get that type of a message about toughness and being mentally strong and things like that which is something that we embrace a lot, and so we even say that to each other, and so we see these messages, and then we repeat them to each other, and so I think that is
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

something that they like that is a big message that we see a lot and that we kind of
embrace and you know use that ourselves.

Messages in this context function very explicitly: both verbal and nonverbal messages that come
from staff in this organization are very intentional and serve a greater purpose for influencing the
identity of the student athlete. These messages intend for student athletes to understand the
expectations that the organization has of them, but also intend to reinforce that the students’
identity exists in relation to other student athletes and what is possible for them.

Challenging student athlete identity

Places of tension came about for individuals in trying to make sense of the seeming
conflicting feelings of individuality and collectivism, as well as understanding that the student
athlete identity is not very stable. These intersections of instability are a result of trying to create
an identity for oneself that is still considered to be socially accepted by established norms of the
organization (Wieland, 2010).

Challenging the student athlete identity through regulation

Trying to establish a place where a person can be an individual while still be considered a
member of the group was mentioned by student athletes as well as staff members of the
organization. Often times the sense and requirement of the putting one’s own individual identity
“to the back burner” to fulfil their requirements as student athletes is perceived as a result of
rules that are enforced by the NCAA through compliance departments of collegiate athletic
institutions. There was one rule in particular regarding the ability of an athletic institution to use
the identity of a student athlete to their own benefit, yet there is an inability, due to NCAA rules,
that the student athlete is not able to utilize their own identity in order to move a personal career,
outside of playing their sport forward. This rule was seen particularly by staff as a place where
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

the collective identity of the athletic department is put ahead of the identity of the individual.

Anastasia describes this from a compliance perspective,

I think compliance, obviously, there are some NCAA rules and regards to what students can and can't do. I think that students using their name image and likeness is a big thing and a hot topic right now. Like, if you want to be a real estate agent, you can't put your face on a business card, but you have to in the real estate business, and so I think that that's something that inhibits the ability for student athletes to pursue a career they're working on changing that right now.

This same rule was talked about another staff member of the athletic institution, Zach,

I think it helps (compliance), but I think there’s times where it hinders as well...like a lot of rules and regulations, the intentions are always good but the outcome is not what is intended. I think it is it is meant to protect the student athlete, but at the same time I think it hurts them as well. Like, they can’t use their own identity to promote themselves, but the university can use their identity to promote the university, so I think that kind of hurts, because it’s saying, hey, don’t be an individual; don’t be you can’t identify yourself as an individual. You have to identify yourself as a university athlete, which can help and hurt. I think it’s you want it to be about team, you want it to be about the university, but there are times and instances where that identity is better served with the athlete.

This regulation that is put in place by the NCAA creates a place where individualism or your personal identity must take second to the identity or the interest of athletics as a whole. This regulation, being enforced by the highest level, tells us a little something about not only this particular athletic organization but of college athletics as a whole. This corresponds to the ideas
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

of Wieland (2010) about tensions that exist when trying to establish one’s individual identity in relation to what the social expectations that are placed upon a person within a particular organization.

Another aspect of being a student athlete where individualism seems to place behind the greater good is through certain valued characteristics such as sacrifice. Anastasia explains how sacrifice plays a big role in the identity of the student athlete,

I think being a student athlete is a lot about sacrifice, so there are a lot of sacrifices that our student athletes make, whether it be sacrificing some social activities to go to bed early so they can get up and go to practice, or sacrificing sleep in order to get school work done because they are doing things. So there is a lot of sacrifice there, and it's also a choice that they have made.

Part of being a student athlete in this excerpt is putting the identity of the organization before your own by giving up things that you may want to do because you are a part of a larger organization. What happens if you do not display these characteristics? Anastasia continued her statement to explain this perception, “Those who do not have sacrifice or commitment usually are not around very long.” If a student athlete does not display a willingness to give up experiences that they otherwise would have been able to do because they are student athletes just exemplifies another way in which individuality is second to collectivity.

This idea relates closely with another NCAA enforced regulation that is under scrutiny for change; time demands. Anastasia once again gives insight into how these NCAA compliance regulations function,

Time demands, I think, is a really big thing that's showing how and no one is showing on the same page and ever. It could be because everyone thinks that their
thing is the most important thing and there should be time for that, and, as the student athletes, you feel the most overwhelmed because you feel obligation to the training room staff to go to that appointment, to go to the doctor's appointment, to go to the community service, to go to the compliance meeting, to go to the snack, like you have all these things happen in the given day.

NCAA mandated regulations create a space where individual and collective identities are constantly clashing. This often times occurs due to the fact that student athlete are told that they are students before they are athletes, yet there is a felling that athletics comes first. This influences student athletes to constantly be shaping themselves in order to be seen as socially acceptable and compliant. This phenomenon is also examined in a study that was conducted by Wieland (2010) where members of an organization were observed trying to be seen as “good” by conforming with what was seen as ideal. This is also supported in these research interview when student athlete, Bonnie, who expressed her desire to be seen as a “good” student athlete explains, “I just want to please the coaches. I think I want to give back to the school for being here on scholarship as well, so that's why I work so hard to be here.” The regulations that are in place by the NCAA are there to protect the status of amateurism, which is at the very core of college athletics. Many of these regulations are enforced so much so that it creates identities that have the very real potential to become unstable. This identity becomes stable through regulations and contingencies that arise around the identity of being a student athlete.

Identity, in the case of the student athlete, is contingent due to the fact that what is possible for you as a student athlete in this department is the determined by the organization itself. Joey, a staff member of this organization, describes this idea here:
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

I think we try our best to kind of mold them into that; mold them into that identity and show them that there are other things. The most important thing is that we want them to identify with being more than just a student athlete, because they bring so much to the table. You can have on one team have people from a team of 10 and you can have 10 different states, 10 different backgrounds and communities coming in, and they are going to be very different. So, they bring their own identity to the table, and then once they get here, we want to we want to kind of help them, I guess, be their own person, but do it in a way that builds up their teammates, builds a better future for them. If someone comes in and they don’t have the right work ethic, attitude, we are not going to reward that, and I don’t think coaches are going to reward that. I think they are going to try and help the student understand how they fit into the larger picture.

While there is an individual aspect here, the valued individual is one who builds their team up and is looking out for the greater good of the department. If a student athlete does not comply with this idea, then it is made very clear that the department will find ways to communicate that this student athlete does understand their role within the organization.

The role of the NCAA plays an integral role in the identity of the student athlete and creates a unique process of how the student athlete identity is regulated. The identity of the student athlete is not only regulated by the organization with which they are directly affiliated, but the identity is also regulated through an organization that is outside of their particular university. This makes the identity of the student athlete maintained through the athletic department of the university that is beholden of the larger organization of the NCAA.

A Contingent Identity
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Identity, while it can be seen as something that is relatively constant overtime, is very different in that sense when it comes to the identity of the student athlete. This is for many reasons that are both seemingly obvious as well as implicit. An individual is only able to hold eligibility for four to five years. This eligibility rule gives a time frame to which you are even allowed to be identified as an active student athlete. Aside from this fact, student-athletes and staff who were interviewed shed light on the ways in which the identity of student athlete is one that even in the duration of those four to five years is not one that is stable or guaranteed. This instability seemed to be related to nonconforming tendencies of some student athletes or when a season or career ending injury occurs.

For student athletes who show nonconforming tendencies of valued behaviors, embodied characteristics in the identity of a student athlete can seem especially unstable for them. Staff members like Anastasia, who was quoted above, express the importance of student athlete’s willingness to embody certain traits in order to maintain the identity of being a student athlete. Smith explains how the ideas of Anastasia functions when it comes to a team,

If there is push back, they are probably not going to, not going to grow. They are not going to develop and they are probably not going to continue in our program, you know. Again, so one of the criteria that we have is coaching ability, how coachable are you and if you are going to push back. This is not the place from you, so and not to say that there won’t be some push back, you know, in small areas, but if there is general push back, it’s not going to work. You know, the one thing about being a student athlete is that it is not a democracy. It’s just, it’s not you know and that you know young men and young women need to understand that there are standards that we have that they have to meet, and, if they don’t
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

meet them, then they are not going to be here, and that is true for the whole athletic department.

The unwillingness of certain student athletes to give themselves to the program and be willing to comply with what a coach asks of them could very possibly, according to this statement, lead to the termination of the student athlete identity for an individual within this particular athletic institution. The possibility of an unstable identity is understood not only by the staff members of this organization but also of the student athletes. Clyde, who is a current student athlete acknowledged this instability during his interview, “I think that, like, being an athlete here is not something that everybody has the opportunity to be a part of, so it's definitely like a blessing that I would not want to take for granted, and it can probably be taken away really quickly.” While being a student athlete is something that is a large opportunity that one has to work very hard for, it is an identity that is seemingly unstable at the same time.

This unstable identity can also be seen through injuries that result in abbreviated seasons or athletic careers. Once the identity of student athlete is taken away from individuals, or even just altered to injured reserve student athlete for a period of time, student athletes, according to both staff and student athletes who have been a witness to injured student athletes, explain how this altered identity takes on a new identity. According to a staff member of this athletic department, Zach, many students lose their competitive drive,

We see it lot when student athletes have either season ending or even career ending injuries, because a lot of times if they are a high level athlete one of the better ones, and I am kind of thinking football more than anything, they identify themselves as a high level athlete that plays sports, and when that is taken away from them because of an injury, they tend to bottom out. They tend to, you know,
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

hit the tank, because they can no longer be identified as an athlete; they are identified as an injured athlete.

After having an identity in which you embody so heavily, it seems to be almost impossible for people to accept a change in this identity or the termination of this identity. John explains this from a student athlete's point of view,

How sports are so much of an identity, because when you can no longer do that you redefine some of the things that you do in your life or who you are outside of those sports, because for so long you are told that you are the best of that, you are the most gifted, or you are going to go far in life because of this sport, but you also have to be able to say, okay, I am human being now, what else, what other things can I do to be and have an identity.

When something has inherently been a part of you for so long, and have worked so hard to receive the identity of being a student athlete, it seems that individuals have a difficult time determining what to do next. What comes after when the identity of being a student athlete is no longer a possibility for whatever reason. This shows how much this identity is actually embodied by student athletes of this athletic organization.

*Resistance through conformity of collectivism and contingent identity*

With many identities, resistance comes as an aspect to that identity; the identity of the student athlete is no exception to that. What is different about the student athlete identity compared to other identities is that resistance comes through further conformity to the athletic department. While this may seem to be a contradictory statement, student athletes shed light on how this process functions. Clyde and Bonnie both spoke into this idea of resisting through conformity in similar ways. Both student athletes expressed how there are aspects of being a
student athlete that seem to be a bother to them rather than a help to them. Clyde, explains how the demand of the student athlete is both beneficial yet unnecessary in his perspective, I think the demands of a student athlete keep me really busy, which I think allows me to like do the best in everything that I'm doing, because I think when I am the most busy, I do better in pretty much everything. With that being said, there are for sure some things that the athletic department requires that are like without a doubt unnecessary.

In the same thought, Clyde described how the demands that he is under as a student athlete benefit him tremendously yet he goes on to say that some things are unnecessary expectations; if he was able to find a way out of he would. “If there is a corner that is able to, because I will probably try to find a way with a lot of time, so you can really get out of those kind of things, but if there's an opportunity to get out of something, like that (a mandatory function), I would definitely take it, and I probably have in the past.” Clyde, while demonstrating forms of resistance, is also demonstrating his continued loyalty and conformity to the organization.

For Bonnie, her forms of resistance come from a place of knowing herself and her tendencies to get done what she needs to without the supervision of others, I would say pressure that I put on myself, because I'm here on scholarship, if I feel like I need to live after that almost, I mean academic wise. I've always kept quite high grades, like that's pretty important to me, so I haven't felt pressure from my academic coordinators, but I do actually got in trouble for getting all my study hall hours, so it's a little things that you need to get and check the boxes for. Like, I mean, I don't really want to come and complete all the study hall hours if I can
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

just study in my room. I know I'm going to get the work done, but it's like little things that you are also expected to do.

Although she finds certain requirements to be unneeded and has attempted to challenge those expectations, she continues to follow through with what is expected of her, even when she knows that what needs to get done will get done.

Both Clyde and Bonnie are performing forms of identity work for the athletic department in which they are a part. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), both student athletes are performing storytelling as a way to navigate their identities. Storytelling, according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), is “the reflexive construction and reproduction of a narrative of oneself is viewed as a potentially effective way of dealing with the openness and uncertainties of life” (p.626). Both Bonnie and Clyde refer to their own experiences as to why time demands and expectations by the organization are both beneficial as well as a nuisance.

Influencing Value Structures

The identity of the student athlete is influenced by many values that make up the entirety of what it means to be a student athlete. These values include representing the student athlete’s institution well, winning and character. All of these values were identified by both staff members and student athletes as being an important aspect of what it means to be a student athlete at this athletic department.

Representation was seen in multiple different ways; though gear that is worn, exemplifying a higher standard than most students, and being a member of a community that not only represents itself but also represents Colorado as a whole. Student athletes Sara, Frodo, and John, as well as staff member Hadley, shed light on what it means to be a representative of this department.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Sara explained how even what she wears and what day she wears it on is significant to representing the athletic department that she is a part of,

I feel like I wear it a lot of times, because it is something that is really easily available to me. Like, I have tons of gear, I get a lot of use out of it, but I do a lot of times find that I wear it a lot more on game days or something like that where I am kind of trying to promote, you know, being an athlete and my team and the university kind of extra on those day, so generally I find that I wear gear more often.

Representation through gear worn was also acknowledged by student athletes as a way to break stereotypes that exist around the identity of student athlete. Student athlete, Frodo, saw wearing gear to class functioning as follows,

You know there is a lot of things, typically people look at athletes as, you know, I think a stereotype out there is you know that we don’t like answer questions or go to class or something like that, and so just being in class, you know, reinforces what our, or what my definition of student athlete is and participating reinforces that community service, even like how we portray ourselves in the media, you know, obviously we are not perfect individuals, but it’s important to, you know, the best face forward that you have and you know that is reinforcing the student athlete identity that you know (this institution) set forth for us.

For Frodo, wearing gear functioned as a way to represent this organization in a positive way in the classroom, as well as in the media. He felt that by doing so, student athletes would be able to challenge some of the existing negative stereotypes that surround the identity of student athlete.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

John takes this a step farther by extending this representation to receiving a higher education — while also pursuing and continuing to play your sport — as well as holding yourself to a standard that may be higher than what is held by the general student body,

It means that you have a responsibility to not only come and get the best education that you possibly can, but you are also here to represent that University and you are … to have the opportunity and privilege of continuing to do a sport or activity that you love, and that has gotten you very far and is that balance of those two things is really, I think, that understated piece of where you learn how to have discipline and you learn how to appreciate and work hard and work in a teams and then also have the ability to kind of market yourself and carry yourself with a higher standard than most students on campus.

Representation is taken out even farther by staff member Hadley by starting at the micro level and working out to a macro perspective, “to be a member of this athletic and learning community and somebody who is willing to take on the responsibilities to represent themselves their coach, the athletic department, the university city, state, it kind of ripples out from there.” From all of these perspectives, the representation that a student athlete portrays is profoundly connected to the identity of the organization as a whole.

Winning, along with the value of representation, is a crucial part of what it means to be a student athlete. Winning, is a driving force in college athletics as a whole. NCAA tournaments for college athletics bring in revenue, fans, and TV times that create a sense that winning is what it is all about. There are fantasy teams, tournament brackets, and bets made all on who individuals believe are going to win.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

This value is so important that it was often included in what it means to be a student athlete. Smith describes this as the following,

I think it means you know to balance you’re your goals academically and working towards a degree, on one hand and on the other, competing in the conference, to compete for championships and win on a consistent basis, and to represent the university in a first class manner… so kind of three pronged student, athlete, and then being a great representative of the court or course or whatever the case may be.

While Smith covers what is often times thought of being the identity of the student athlete, being a student as well as being an athlete, Smith adds complexity to this identity by contributing the idea that being a student athlete means that winning as well as representing that school is an integral aspect of what it means to be a student athlete.

As explained by staff member Anastasia, winning is an expectation that may be unique to certain athletic organizations, particularly those that are considered Division I,

Different divisions in collegiate sports, there is a different ideal, because in like division 3, it's about teamwork camaraderie and experience and less about winning, you know, and at the higher level at Division 1, at an autonomy school, which is like the big 5 conferences, there is this underlying win or get out mentality.

For an athletic department of a major university, winning is seen as a very valuable thing and is often times the driving force for everything that they do.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

For this athletic department, winning is a big part of their mission of what they find as valuable to accomplish. Smith speaks into this by explaining the goals of this athletic organization from a top down perspective,

Well again, I don’t know, I don’t know organizationally, I know from our athletic director, you know, every time that we are around him part of our strategic plan that this department went through a few years ago was we want to create a world class atmosphere and opportunity for all our student athletes, and we want to compete for and win national championships or win championships. I guess I should say national championships, but we want to compete for and win championships, and so I do think that there is a message that we are going to provide our student athletes with tremendous resources to be successful in every aspect of your life.

Here, the success of communication within this athletic organization is made evident. Smith was able to identify the main goals of the department from the perspective of the athletic director. This top down hierarchical system from boss to employees seems to be horizontal where everyone is on the same page and understands the common goals of the organization.

Another value that holds a lot of weight within this department is the character of the student athletes. Character of the student athlete is something that is taken into consideration even during the early stages of recruitment to becoming a student athlete for this athletic department. Coach Smith described how this functions in his recruitment strategies,

In terms of recruiting, we have a list of criteria that we use to recruit players and the number one, the number one criteria is character. We want high character people in our program, and we need to have high character student athletes
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

throughout all of our programs, so character is certainly number one, the number one thing, and then you get down to work ethic and love of the sport, toughness, you know, all of the things that separate, separate athletes.

Character, for Smith, is the most important aspect of a prospective student athlete. For other staff members of the department who are not coaches, character that is recruited to this athletic department is noted. Zach was able to identify the importance of character while being a student athlete within this organization. He also expressed how having character within the value structure of this department bodes well for student athletes,

It’s a little bit of a group. It’s kind of like, not a fraternity or a sorority, but just kind of like just another group to identify yourself as an athlete, and I think with the style of the character of athletes that come here, that our coaches recruit here, I think speaks volumes to that group. It’s always good character, good morals you know, for the most part, so I think it’s a unique group that people identify you guys with on campus. You know, it’s kind of like, yes sometimes you can definitely say, yes, that’s a football player, that’s definitely a cross country player, but not everyone has that stand out identity. Cross country, golf, but it’s still you are known as a student athlete, and I think it’s respected by a lot of people who know the demand, the added demands that you guys have on yourselves with that.

Zach then goes on to explain how character being within the value structure of this organization is not just something that is important to the coaches who are recruiting student athletes but how it is something that is also valued by the administration,

I think what is coming from our administration and our coaches is that we want good people here, that want to be here, want to succeed, and want to win in the
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

classroom and in athletics. We don’t want people to be here who are complacent, just here because they have a scholarship to play or have the chance to play here, that we want people to come here that are high character that want to succeed and that have a good academic background as well.

Again, this displays the success of communication that this particular organization is able to accomplish where staff members of the organization are able to verbalize the values and the goals that are set forth from the top down.

Many of these values that have been identified as important to the overall value structure of the organization are very well connected with one another. Often times when there are individuals within the organization who display good character and understand the difference between right and wrong, and understand that the representation that the public has of the teams and the student athletes who are involved in the organization are going to be positive. When the public sees the organization as a positive place to be, there are going to be more fans who want to see a lot of winning. All of these values are connected with one another in a way that creates a positive cycle.

While coaches set standards early on for recruitment — who they are willing to invite to be a member of their team — there is bound to be individuals who slip through the cracks and are an exception to the precedence that is set. Zach explain how there is room for shaping the values of the student athletes who do not come in with the expected character or value set,

So I think it’s not, I would not say a day to day; it’s maintaining identity because developing as an individual there are highs and lows with everything you do. If it’s in the classroom, if it’s getting you know coached on the field of whatever it might be, there are highs and lows. But what I think is important is not necessarily
the day to day, it’s the longevity of the identity. I think it’s something that can be somewhat molded, helped and molded, but that what we are looking for is long term, not necessarily day to day. You want people to be consistent but understanding that you can’t be consistent all the time, but longevity the identity would, you know, would help. What our goal is, I think, as a university is to help build that identity throughout the entire time that athletes are here. Here it is not necessarily how an athlete begins but it is about how they end and the growth that display from entering college as a student athlete to exiting as one. By creating a space for student athletes to grow as a person, Zach describes how the organization is able to function in producing student athletes who display the desired character of the department. By helping that student athlete through their college career, the department is essentially creating an individual who will go out into the world and represent the organization well, just with a little bit of time and mentoring.

The identity of the student athlete is influenced by the organization as well as navigated by the student athlete themselves. Both of these things occur through messages, tensions and values that the athletic department enforces.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Scholarly contributions

Every theme including aspiring, challenging, resistance, and value structures, identified above in the findings served a greater purpose of what was happening through the processes of these themes. Messages, tensions and value structures all function in regulation of the student athlete identity. While there were forms for resistance that came from student athletes, that
resistance was shown through continued compliance as well as embodiment of characteristics that make up the student athlete identity. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe nine characteristics to which they identify as forms of organizational control. Characteristics that seemed to be most relevant to the overarching themes of this research, listed above, were the following: defining a person by defining another; explicating morals and values; group categorization and affiliation; establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules to the game (p. 629-32).

After conducting analysis of the interviews, both student athletes and staff members provided examples to which exemplified these identity regulation characteristics set forth by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). These characteristics of organizational control were seen and explained by interviewees through the messages (both verbal and nonverbal), tensions in the student athlete identity, and an explicit value structure. The themes that have been identified give examples for us to understand how each of these characteristics contributes to organizational identity regulation in the context of the student athlete identity. While there were examples given that explained what would happen to the student athlete identity if there was resistance to comply, student athletes who were interviewed never spoke about wanting to show this. Student athletes who were interviewed explained how they fully had adopted and embodied the characteristics of what it means to be a student athlete and were not shy to say how much they love being a student athlete. When there was evidence of certain resistances, the student athletes responded to these resistances with further compliance. This exemplifies the success of the organization in getting across what it means to be a student athlete and performing identity regulation.

The first characteristic of defining a person by defining another seemed to exemplify in all three themes that have been identified. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), “a person
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

(or a group) can be identified indirectly by reference to the characteristics of specific others” (p. 629). All three of the overarching themes of what it means to be a student athlete were in a way made successful by this characteristic of identity regulation.

Messages that were received by student athletes often times were in relation to the successes of other fellow student athletes. These successes included academic as well as athletic successes by displaying different awards in main buildings of the athletic department. Having these awards on display fed into the precedent of what is expected of the student athlete by the organization as well as who to look to as a display of those characteristics. Not only were these successes on display as a nonverbal message, but they also occurred through verbal messages of affirmations such as encouragement and positive reinforcement. These positive messages could be heard by other teammates and function as “definition for oneself” for both the person who is receiving these messages as well as the person who could have heard a teammate receiving these messages. These messages seemed to relate not only to athletic success, but they also fed into the ideas of tensions and values. Through receiving different messages over the course of student athlete’s careers, athletes, such as Sara, who was quoted in findings, claimed that it is interesting to think back on how being a student athlete in her third year as a junior comes so much easier to her than it did as a freshman in her first year. She experiences both tension and coming to understand the value structure of her team, but through verbal and nonverbal messages, she has come to fully embody the identity of the student athlete which now comes so naturally to her. This exemplifies that identity is strongly embodied by student athletes who are exposed to messages, both verbal and nonverbal, on a daily basis. The messages that the student athlete is exposed to on a daily basis function to help student athletes aspire to achieve success, but they
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

also function in giving student athletes ideas about what is possible for the identity of the student athlete and where their identity exists and functions within the organization.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) also explain a characteristic of identity regulation utilized by organizations as one where morals and values are explicated, “espoused values and stories with a strong morality operate to orient identity in a specific direction or at least stimulate this process” (p.630). In the case of the athletic department in this research, student athletes were very aware of the morals and values that were expected of them. The one emphasized the most is the value of representation. Every interview participant that was analyzed for this study made a statement about how representation of selves, community, or even the entire state was with the individual student athlete. Another value that is very closely tied with this idea of representation is that of portraying good character. This organization values individuals who portray good character, understanding the difference between right and wrong, or just simply being a good person with strong morals. In order to have this organization of student athletes who are able to represent the organization or even state well, these student athletes need to consistently display good character. It seems that the identity of the organization as a whole was very strongly tied with the identities of student athletes and in order for the organization to accomplish its needs the student athletes act as a liaison for the representation of the organization as a whole. This was often times explicitly stated by interviewees who recalled conversations around “don’t make us look bad” and “we want you to reflect us.” By using this language, staff members are strongly communicating that the identity of the student athlete is to be kept as blemish free as possible for the greater good of the organization as a whole. Another value that is perceived as valuable by the organization consists of winning and competing on a regular basis. Winning, just as the student athlete representation, signifies what the organization holds as core values. Many of the
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

staff members who were participants of this study described that the intentional plan of the department that is communicated to them from the top down. Winning, is just another example of positive representation for the department. Winning equates to success of the program. By “explicating the morals and values” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p.630), the organization enforces these values through messages and create student athletes who represent the organization as a whole in a way in which the organization wants to be represented.

Even with the student athlete identity as one that seems to be strongly accepted and enforced, it is one that comes along with its own tensions. These tensions became apparent through described conflicts between individualism and collectivism, as well as the concept that the student athlete identity is not one that is particularly stable. Although these characteristics of the student athlete identity may seem to be out of the control of an athletic department, this particular department was able to utilize this as another way to practice organizational regulation of student athletes in very direct ways. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), “group categorization and affiliation is one frequently powerful way of regulating identity is through developing social categories to which the individual is ascribed” (p. 630). By having control over who can and cannot be a student athlete the organization is able to enforce these expectations upon their student athletes. Being the student athletes want to maintain this identity and fully embody it, student athletes are willing to comply.

Compliance is a main contributor in the tensions surrounding individualism and collectivism makes this tension one that is seemingly unavoidable. Due to certain regulations that are enforced by the NCAA to protect the amateur state of all student athletes, individualism is second to collectivism. These regulations are enforced through the compliance departments of each college athletic program in the nation and there is little that the individual student athlete or
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

the individual athletic departments are able to do outside the boundaries of these strict protocols. If student athletes do not comply with regulations that require placing their own personal identities to the background, then they run the risk of losing their amateur status and then losing the identity of being a student athlete.

Oftentimes, group categorization in the case of the student athlete is also enforced through the inherent values to which the organization holds their student athletes. For example, Anastasia, spoke about how sacrifice and commitment played a large role in the identity of the student athlete. Often, this sacrifice requires student athletes to place the interests of the collective group (the athletic organization) over the interests of themselves. This creates a space when the identity of the student athlete has the potential to be challenged not only through explicit rules and regulations but also through unspoken rules of institutional valued characteristics for student athletes.

Group affiliation can also be altered through injuries that either end seasons or careers for student athletes. The identity of being a student athlete, particularly having the identity of an athlete, becomes very difficult to alter once it has been taken away through an injury. Once an individual is a part of the social category of student athlete, that student athlete “becomes” something—something that is very hard to leave behind or change. It requires individuals to alter the way in which the see themselves within the group and could possibly even alter the ways in which other student athletes see that individual existing within that group. This may be due to the fact that student athletes who are injured usually continue being a part of the athletic department, but they are not able to fulfill all expectations of what it means to be a student athlete physically.
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Being able to regulate the identity of the student athlete the athletic department is performing what Alvesson and Willmott (2002) call, “establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules of the game. Established ideas and norms about the ‘natural’ way of doing things in a particular context can have major implications for identity constructions” (p. 631). By providing student athletes with both spoken and unspoken expectations, athletic organizations are creating the norms of what it means to be a student athlete. Deetz (1994) not only compared this idea of organizational norms to how instincts function within animals, but he also stated that, “institutional control works more like control seen in phenomenological account of personal habits or sedimentation” (Deetz, 29). Here, institutional control has the ability to influence the consciousness that one has for their personal habits. Student athlete Sara spoke to this idea with her description about how much easier it is to be a student athlete now compared to what it was like as a freshman. She explained how “student athlete” just becomes a part of what you do, and you no longer have to think about it. This example exemplifies how Deetz’s (1994) ideas of organizational influence of your personal habit is a reality for identities such as the identity of the student athlete.

Practical connections

There are many individuals who take on the identity of student athlete as well as many individuals who are striving to become student athletes in the future. The athletic department in which I studied was very effective in communicating their expectations for student athletes. While there were forms of resistance towards regulations that are set forth, these regulations seemed to be unavoidable due to the fact that there is an organization regulating the student athlete identity within the regulations of another organization. While many of the regulations set forth by the NCAA can seemingly overshadow the identity of the student athlete; student athletes
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

also expressed the ability to use these regulations to benefit the overall image of the student athlete. One student athlete in particular explained how wearing gear and representing yourself bode well as a way for him to break stereotypical thoughts of being a student athlete. While stereotypes, according to Dee (2009) were something that often negatively influenced the performance of the student athlete in the classroom, Frodo expressed how you can use the image of the student to actually break those stereotypes and become a successful student in the classroom.

Both the athletic department as well as the student athletes that were interviewed also expressed how the existing identity of student athlete is one that can be positive and beneficial for both the organization as well as the individual. If this was not the case, then there would not be the desire for individuals to have this identity in this country as well as around the world.

This research would also give administration valuable information when it comes to policy making. Understanding the perspective of the student athlete and the needs of the student athlete would be vital knowledge to have due to the fact that without student athletes you do not have college sports. This research could also give incoming student athletes very valuable information as they prepare for their first years as student athletes. When I began my first year I had no idea what to expect and what I did expect was nowhere near the reality.

When considering the contributions that this study would make to the existing literature, it adds a layer of complexity. Much of the research done within organizational communication has been between a single organization and their employees for example. This study not only has the relationship between the organization and student athlete but it also includes a larger institution (the NCAA) that influences the relationship between organization and student athlete.

Limitations
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

One limitation of this study was the inability to reach out to more student athletes. There are many individuals who represent college athletics as well as many institutions and individual teams who are less constrained by formal regulations and have more autonomy to potentially choose what values are more important to them. Not having the ability to reach out to individuals of those different institutions or different sports that were not available here makes this a case study of the identity of the student athlete at a single institution over the time of the study.

Another limitation is an internal bias due to the fact that I am a current student athlete. This at times made it difficult to takes that extra step back and take the data for what it is worth. I wanted to apply the information that I knew and how I saw things to what other people were saying and feeling. While this aspect at times functioned as a limitation, it also served me well during the study. Due to the fact that this research is so close to home for me, I was able to become greatly invested in the research that I was conducting.

Conclusion

This study shed light to ideas of how the identity of student athlete is constructed and regulated through the organization of the athletic department. Identity regulation is successfully influenced though the use of messages, value structures and even tensions. These overarching themes are necessary not only for the construction of the student athlete identity but also for the identity of the organization as a whole. The identity of the student athlete reflects the identity of the athletic department in which the student athletes are affiliated. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the athletic department to make their expectations both explicit and implicit, allowing for students to embody the characteristics of the model student athlete.

Through the messages, value structures, and tensions that an athletic department utilizes to regulate the identity of the student athlete, full embodiment of values is achieved. Student
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

athlete identities are created overtime and become, in the words of Deetz (1994), “like an instinct is to an animal;” it influences even your daily habits. Being a student athlete can start as something very foreign and complex and turn into something that becomes more second nature — that individuals can perform without even thinking about it. The organization constructs the notions of student athlete by utilizing messages (verbal and nonverbal), explicit value structures, and even through creating tensions for the identity of the student athlete.

This research has shown a very positive reaction to these organizational regulations. The student athletes who were a part of this study were all able to say that they accept and are proud to have the identity of being a student athlete. Student athletes who even described feeling resentment towards some of the expectations of them, continued to show that they were still compliant with these regulations in order to continue with the group identity of being a student athlete.

References
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity


**Acknowledgements**
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

There have been multiple individuals who have helped me immensely throughout this entire process including Dr. Matthew Koschmann, Dr. Cindy White, Dr. Malinda Zarske, Rex Parks and my peers who were also conducting honors thesis research.

I want to give my appreciation to Dr. Matthew Koschmann for his support through my entire writing and research process. His dedication of time to my project and to me will be forever cherished. Dr. Matthew Koschmann pushed me to thinking more critically about my topic while also providing me with encouragement when it was needed. Without him this experience would not have been the same.

Dr. Cindy White was not only our honors thesis instructor but she provided me with the comfort of knowing that I always had someone to ask questions to and express my excitement and stresses through this entire process.

Dr. Malinda Zarske was willing to take the time to join this journey with me for the defense process. I appreciate her for not only taking the time to read my thesis and be a part of the defense process but also for all of the questions and suggestions that she made to me.

Rex Parks acted as a mentor to me through this entire process. I was able to not only talk about my project with him but he also was a huge support to me in my times of being unsure about my research and also in the times where I was excited he kept me grounded with my eyes set on my final goal.

Finally, I would like to thank my peers for their continued support through this whole entire process. They were always there for me if I had questions, or needed a little extra support. I will always appreciate every single one of you.

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter
28-Jan-2016

Dear Alexis Keating,
On 28-Jan-2016 the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Submission:</th>
<th>Initial Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review Category:</td>
<td>Exempt - Category 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Organizational Influence of Student-Athlete Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Keating, Alexis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protocol #:</td>
<td>16-0025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents Approved:</td>
<td>16-0025 Consent Form (28Jan16); 16-0025 Protocol (28Jan16); Recruitment E-mail; Interview Schedule;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents Reviewed:</td>
<td>HRP-211: FORM - Initial Application;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The IRB approved the protocol on 28-Jan-2016.

Click the link to find the approved documents for this protocol: Approved Documents. Use copies of these documents to conduct your research.

In conducting this protocol you must follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,
Douglas Grafel
IRB Admin Review Coordinator
Institutional Review Board
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Student-athlete Interview questions

1. How do you perform (live out) the identity of student athlete?
   a. Do you accept this identity?
   b. Do you ever avoid or reinforce the identity of student athlete?
   c. What do you do in class to either avoid? Use as example if they are having a hard time getting there
   d. Do you resist this identity is certain situations? How? Why? Are there things that are expected of you that bother you? Have you been in trouble for doing something that you don’t think you should be in trouble?
   e. What do you try to get away with anything or how far you can push boundaries?
   f. What is it like to maintain this identity in relation to the athletic department and the NCAA?
   g. Do you ever over emphasize the identity? How? Has that hurt or helped you

2. What kinds of messages do you receive from athletic department that influences this identity? NCAA? Coaches? Administrators?
   a. How do you respond to this? Are you compliant or resisting this identity?
   b. Posters?
   c. Pictures on the walls?
   d. Emails?
   e. Banquets?
   f. Do you feel

Administration/staff Interview questions

1. What does it mean to be a student-athlete?
   a. Is there an ideal student athlete? What does the ideal student athlete look like?
   b. What does it look like to not be the ideal student athlete? How?
   c. Do non ideal student athletes ever frustrate you? How? Why?
   d. Is this identity maintained?

2. How does the organization regulate this identity?
   a. How is the student athlete identity maintained and influenced?
   b. How do you function in maintaining the student-athlete identity?
   c. What are the values associated with being a student-athlete?
   d. How are those values enforced?
   e. How is the identity of the student-athlete regulated? (e.g. Compliance)
   f. How are these regulations decided on?
   g. Certainly you are aware of the controversy around the term student-athlete in regards amateurism, unionization, the legal categorization of student-athlete, video game revenues what are your thoughts about this?
      -why is it important to keep the identity of student athlete a certain way?
## Appendix C: Summary of Data Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta-theme</th>
<th>Samples of initial codes</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspiring</td>
<td>Influence of others</td>
<td>Messages</td>
<td>“In a way I sometimes wonder like how do they possibly do it, because sometimes things can be so stressful that you think like I don’t know how it’s possible to balance these two things like well and like be so good at both like academic and athletic but at the same time you look up to those people and say and can think that it is possible because they have all done it so them it’s almost like you can do it as well.” -Kristin p. 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pleasing others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unspoken rules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive reinforcement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonverbal messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of expectation</td>
<td>expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Messages… most of the time this comes from positive reinforcement so you have championship recognition dinners you have people coming up to you saying congratulations whether it’s academic coordinators or tutors or just people that are like excited and invested in you and they are really happy for how you have done and so once you do well you want to continue to do well….Yea I think it if it can almost like inflate you like sense of worth and your confidence in your athletic ability so it’s like oh wow you did really well you didn’t need to say that and so then it slowly raises your like cockiness I guess more your confidence and then it also raises the bar of what is expected of you as well so to have success that is kind of extended to an expectation.” -John p. 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Challenging       | Limits student athlete   | regulations    | “I think compliance obviously there are some NCAA rules and regards to what students can and can’t do I think that students using their name image and likeness is a big thing and a hot topic right now like if you want to be a real estate agent you can’t put your face on a business card but you have to in the real estate business and so I think that that’s something that inhibits the ability for student
### Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resistance</th>
<th>Conforming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Injuries make you redefine identity</td>
<td>Contingent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injuries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student athlete without certain values</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity can be taken away</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity struggles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic struggles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Anastasia p. 27

- Clyde p. 32

- Bonnie p. 35

- Hadley p. 38

- Clyde p. 34-35

### Value Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value Structure</th>
<th>Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity &amp; Privilege</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher pedestal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking Stereotypes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every decision counts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- to be member of this athletic and learning community and somebody who is willing to take on the responsibilities to represent themselves their coach, the athletic department, the university city, state, it kind of ripples out from there.” -Hadley p. 38
### Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

| Humbleness | Character | “it’s a little bit of a group it kind of like not a fraternity or a sorority but just kind of like just a another group to identify yourself as an athlete and I think with the style of the character of athletes that come here that our coaches recruit here I think speaks volumes to that group it’s always good character good morals you know for the most part so I think it’s a unique group that people identify you guys with on campus you know it’s kind of like yes sometimes you can definitely say yes that a football player that’s definitely a cross country player but not everyone has that stand out identity cross country, golf but it’s still you are known as a student athlete and I think its respected by a lot of people know the demand, the added demands that you guys have on yourselves with that.”
| Sacrifice | | -Zach p. 40 |
| Recruitment method | | “I think it means you know to balance you’re your goals academically and working towards a degree on one hand and on the other competing in the conference to compete for championships and win on a consistent basis and to represent the university in a first class manner… so kind of three pronged student, athlete, and then being a great representative of the court or course or whatever the case may be.”
| Commitment | | -Coach Smith p. 38 |
| Honesty | | |
| Publicity is motivation | winning | |
| Unspoken rules | | |
| Part of mission | | |
| Feeling important | | |
Organizational Influence on Student Athlete Identity

Appendix D, Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Athletes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Participants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff and Administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Participants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>