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### **A Model for Assessing Organizational Culture in Intercollegiate Athletic Departments**

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*Beyer and Hannah (2000) have suggested that a major barrier to the reform of intercollegiate athletics is its cultural significance in higher education. Even leaders within the National Collegiate Athletic Association have acknowledged the need for culture change in intercollegiate athletics (Brand, 2001; Dempsey, 2000). Yet major culture change has not occurred and few studies have examined culture within intercollegiate athletic departments (Ridpath, 2008). This gap may be due, in part, to the lack of a framework with which to analyze athletic departments as organizational cultures. Schein's (2004) model of organizational culture is the most frequently cited perspective in the literature, but it applies primarily to corporate cultures (Hatch, 2000). Several frameworks have been developed to assess college and university cultures, but intercollegiate athletics occupies a unique space between sport and education (Beyer & Hannah, 2000). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to offer a model for assessing the cultures of intercollegiate athletic departments. The four elements of the model— institutional culture, external environment, internal environment, and leadership/power—are presented and followed by an explanation of their interaction. The paper concludes with a case study demonstrating the use of the model to define one athletic department's culture.*

**W**ithin the past ten years, 'changing the culture' has become a common anthem for both leaders and critics of intercollegiate athletics. Former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) President Cedric Dempsey (2000) saw a "change in culture" as necessary for the future progress of the NCAA. Recent NCAA president Myles Brand (2001) continued working to "close the gap between the cultures of athletics and academics" (p. 4). Despite these acknowledgements, change has not occurred (Ridpath, 2008). Athlete deviance is still common on college campuses (Moran, 2010). Academic fraud remains evident (Carter, 2010). Coaches are still violating NCAA rules and regulations (NCAA, 2009b), and the arms race continues to proliferate (NCAA, 2009a).

Beyer and Hannah (2000) contend these failures are not due to lack of administrative effort, but rather to the inability of leaders to deal with culture appropriately. They argue intercollegiate athletic programs elicit strong emotions from students, fans, alumni, and boosters. These groups transform their passions into powerful values and ideologies that ultimately become entangled into the economic factors of operating an athletic department. Yet leaders

have been ignorant of these values or unwilling to grapple with these, “cultural ideologies” (Beyer & Hannah, p. 127; Frey, 1994; Putler & Wolfe, 1999; Southall & Nagel, 2008; Trail & Chelladurai, 2002). Beyer and Hannah conclude that only by dealing with these values and the artifacts symbolizing them can leaders hope to create lasting reforms.

While the promotion of such reforms is encouraging, they lack power without a clear understanding of organizational culture in general or the specific ways in which this management concept applies to intercollegiate athletic departments. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to apply a practical framework of organizational culture to intercollegiate athletic departments. First, this paper will explain organizational culture and its link to leadership. Second, a summary of previous frameworks for assessing organizational culture within the context of higher education will be offered. Third, the literature on organizational values in intercollegiate athletics will be reviewed. Fourth, a model of organizational culture specific to intercollegiate athletics will be explained. Finally, the model will be used to profile the organizational culture of one intercollegiate athletic department. In doing so, the hope is to provide a framework that can be used by athletic directors and scholars alike to improve leadership and research efforts.

### *Organizational Culture*

In the past decade, several best-selling management books, (e.g., *Built to Last*; *The Starbucks Experience*), have identified strong organizational cultures as vital to long-term corporate success. Although researchers debate the merits of the cultural-performance link (for a review, see Wilderom, Glunk, & Maslowski, 2000), successful companies invariably feature distinct corporate cultures. Yet culture is an incredibly difficult concept to define and assess because culture results from several social processes among an organization’s members (Geertz, 2000; Martin, 2002). This collective process involves negotiation over what actions, ideas, and items mean within an organization or group. When there is consensus on these meanings, they are linked together into what Trice and Beyer (1993) call ideologies. Ideologies are a powerful cultural base because they bind organizational members together and help them fulfill their organizational roles (Martin, 2002; Martin & Siehl, 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1993). As group members carry out their roles in consistent fashions, these ideologies become patterned and are ultimately driven into members’ subconscious and become taken for granted as shared assumptions (Schein, 2004). Thus, organizational culture is viewed as the pattern of basic assumptions that guides organizational behavior.

Martin (2002) identified three different perspectives on organizational culture: integrative, differentiation, and fragmentation, but Schein's (2004) integrative, leader-centered model is a commonly accepted framework for uncovering the web of culture (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Hatch, 2000; Morgan, 2003; Sathe & Davidson, 2000). This three-tiered model of organizational culture consists of artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions.

Artifacts comprise the most superficial tier of Schein’s model and refer to those cultural elements that one can see, hear, or feel. Although artifacts like mascots, fight songs, and facilities are easy to perceive, underlying meanings associated with these artifacts are not always clear. As a result artifacts offer an incomplete or inaccurate picture of organizational culture (Schein; Trice & Beyer, 1993). At the second level, espoused values refer to the “norms that provide the day-to-day operating principles by which members of the group guide their behavior” (Schein, p. 18). Often these espoused value appear in mission statements and handbooks stating what an organization wants and providing an indication of the importance of those desires (Ott, 1989).

Espoused values and artifacts often coincide, but may still inaccurately describe organizational culture. It is not uncommon for an organization to act in complete contrast with its stated beliefs and values (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Schein). To best access organizational culture, basic assumptions must be uncovered. Basic assumptions are the true basis from which to examine organizational behavior as they provide a subconscious, almost thoughtless, guide for members to react to the environment (Ott; Schein). Ultimately, the basic assumptions provide members of an organizational culture with the mental maps that guide their perceptions, feelings, and actions within the culture (Hatch; Schein).

When examining any organizational culture, an accounting of subcultures is also imperative (Martin & Siehl, 1983; Morgan, 2006; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Subcultures arise when subgroups within the organization share enough experiences to create their own “distinctive clusters of ideologies” (Trice & Beyer, p. 174). While subcultural assumptions can develop around a variety of bases (e.g., occupation, geography, product), the nature of these assumptions determines the subculture’s effect on the dominant organizational culture (Martin & Siehl; Schein). In enhancing subcultures, the assumptions of the, “dominant culture would be more fervent than in the rest of the organization” (Martin & Siehl, p. 54). Members of orthogonal subcultures also accept the norms of the overall culture. However, orthogonal subcultures simultaneously operate on their own assumptions sets, but these subcultural assumptions do not conflict with those of the dominant culture. Countercultures do feature assumptions that clash with those of the host culture creating, “an uneasy symbiosis” (Martin & Siehl, p. 54). Such situations require leadership skills that, “will maintain mutual respect and create coordinated action” (Schein, p. 289) throughout an organization.

Thus, culture is intricately linked with leadership. Schein (2004) contends that “the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture” (p. 11). When managing organizational culture, leaders can take one of four actions (Trice & Beyer, 1993). In young organizations, leaders create organizational culture. As cultures mature, leaders must work to integrate diffuse subcultures. When organizational cultures or subcultures are maladaptive, leading cultural change is required. Once cultures become functional, leaders focus on cultural embodiment. As the organization and its environment evolve, leaders have a responsibility to alter their cultural actions (Morgan, 2006; Schein). Having a framework to access all cultural elements provides leaders with the best opportunity to uphold that responsibility.

### *Organizational Culture in Higher Education*

Before developing an organizational culture model for intercollegiate athletics, it is necessary to examine how this perspective has been applied to higher education in general. Most of the literature on organizational culture arose out of the corporate sector, but universities and colleges do not operate in a wholly profit-centered environment. With its multifaceted goals, multitude of offerings, and passionate stakeholders, American higher education is an environment unlike any other in the world (Duderstadt, 2000). Out of this environment evolve institutional cultures that are uniquely structured and require a malleable framework for assessment.

Several such frameworks have been developed from which five main features emerge (Bergquist, 1992; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Rhoads & Tierney, 1992; Tierney, 1988; 2008). First, investigating university culture demands an accounting of the institutional history. The rationale for a university’s founding, growth, and development underscores numerous values and

assumptions. The internal environment of a university is a second major element of its culture. The mission of the college serves as an espoused value by which its actions can be evaluated and the academic program is often an outgrowth of that. A third element of institutional culture is the subcultures created by students, faculty, and staff. Each subculture has the ability to strengthen, amend, or threaten the overall culture. Fourth, the assessment of university culture must account for numerous entities in the external environment. Accreditation bodies, professional agencies, media outlets, alumni, grant sources, and the market of prospective students are just a few externalities that have the potential to alter a university's values and assumptions. Leadership is the final element that must be considered when assessing university culture. Leadership is unique in that it must account for all of the preceding elements, but it can also emerge from any part of the culture. While this framework is a solid basis for understanding culture in higher education, it does not account for the unique nature and structure of the intercollegiate athletic environment.

### *Values and Intercollegiate Athletics*

While there are only two studies explicitly examining organizational culture in athletic departments (Southall & Nagel, 2003; Southall, Wells & Nagel, 2005), there is a significant body of research on values and assumptions in intercollegiate athletics. Central to many of these studies is an inconsistency of values. Traditionally, this dichotomy has been presented as a contrast between amateurism and commercialism and a related discrepancy between academic values and athletic values (Baxter, Margavio & Lambert, 1996; Trail & Chelladurai, 2002). The NCAA advocates a philosophy of amateurism for intercollegiate athletes (NCAA, 2007), yet the NCAA, television networks, conferences, and a few universities make millions of dollars through intercollegiate competition (Noll, 2004; Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008; Southall & Nagel 2008; Zimbalist, 1999). In pursuit of this profit, college coaches, administrators and athletes expend significant time, energy and money to create successful programs (Noll). However, doing so has resulted in low athlete graduation rates, a lack of academic integration among athletes, and numerous forms of deviance (Adler & Adler, 1991; NCAA, 2008; Sperber, 2000a; Southall, 2001).

However, Sack (2009) has recently suggested that these problems result not from dichotomous values but instead from differences in core assumptions about higher education, commercialization, and athletic scholarships. He outlined three basic assumption sets: intellectual elitism, academic capitalism, and athletes' rights advocates (Sack). Intellectual elitists see scholarships, excessive expenditures, and lower admissions standards for athletics leading to an overemphasis on winning and revenue which detract from academic achievement. Academic capitalism supports the commercialization of college sport believing it provides career preparation lessons and the revenue needed to broaden access to higher education as well as improve academic support for athletes. Athletes' rights advocates view college sport as a business, but see athletes as being exploited in this business because they are not treated as employees yet provide much of the product.

Frey (1994) attributes value discrepancies in intercollegiate athletics to "the structural and organizational characteristics of colleges and universities" (p. 111). Because universities as a whole tend to operate with a norm of departmental autonomy, athletic departments are able to develop independent values. These values are subsequently rewarded by a variety of externalities (i.e., television networks, boosters) that provide the resources athletic departments need to operate. These factors combine to create situations where athletic departments become

“organizational mutation[s]” (Frey, p.120), or countercultures, whose values conflict with universities’ academic missions. Even within athletic departments, value discrepancies persist. Southall, Wells, and Nagel (2005), found significant differences in values between revenue and non-revenue programs as well as male and female programs.

Another perspective contends that the assumptions of intercollegiate athletics are grounded in the values of its stakeholders (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Putler & Wolfe, 1999; Trail & Chelladurai, 2002). Trail and Chelladurai contend that the values of the most powerful stakeholders influence the goals and processes of a particular athletic department. However, locating powerful stakeholders is not easy because stakeholders tend to cluster around values (e.g., winning, education) and not simply group membership (e.g., faculty, booster) (Putler & Wolfe). Furthermore, these stakeholders create rites, rituals and symbols to celebrate their values (Beyer & Hannah). However, because stakeholders “care a great deal about sports and the many norms, values, and ideas implicitly represented” (Beyer & Hannah, p. 127) such constituents can pose significant barriers to change in intercollegiate athletics.

The concept of institutional logics has recently emerged as a way to understand the root of these deeply held values. Similar to the concept of organizational culture, Southall, Nagel, Amis and Southall (2008) have found externalities are the source of many assumptions upon which intercollegiate athletics operate. In particular, television networks and the NCAA make decisions that lead stakeholders to subconsciously accept and support commercialization in intercollegiate athletics. Using a professional model of broadcasting, paying exorbitant rights fees, and hiring professional sports TV executives, CBS and ESPN create a commercial logic that strongly influences how stakeholders see intercollegiate athletics. Furthermore, the NCAA is complicit in creating this logic by supporting commercial policies and ignoring its own rules for commercial gain (Southall et al.; Southall & Nagel, 2008).

However, not all basic assumptions influencing athletic department cultures stem from the external environment. The internal environment can also have a strong effect on a university's assumptions about athletics. Evidence has demonstrated that highly selective colleges (Baxter, Margavio & Lambert, 1996) and NCAA Division III members (Mahony, Hums & Reimer, 2002; Schroeder, 2000) have different athletic orientations than their Division I counterparts. Coakley (2007) suggests that non-Division I programs may operate on assumptions that support the academic values of higher education. Yet, an overwhelming majority of the previous research on the value discrepancy in intercollegiate athletics has focused on Division I members. This limited focus provides a “distorted views of intercollegiate athletic programs” (Coakley, p. 495). Thus, a flexible cultural framework is needed that can provide leaders and researchers with access to the variety of elements contributing to athletic department values at all competition levels.

### *A Model of Intercollegiate Athletic Culture*

The essential, but not mutually exclusive, elements of the intercollegiate athletic department culture are presented in figure 1. In fact, at every college or university, these elements will interact in unique ways to form a distinct athletic department culture. Table 1 presents key questions to help leaders and researchers define the unique cultures of specific athletic departments. For purposes of explanation, each element is presented in isolation, and an explanation of the elements’ interaction will conclude the section.

Figure 1: Interaction of the elements of the model of intercollegiate athletic department cultures.

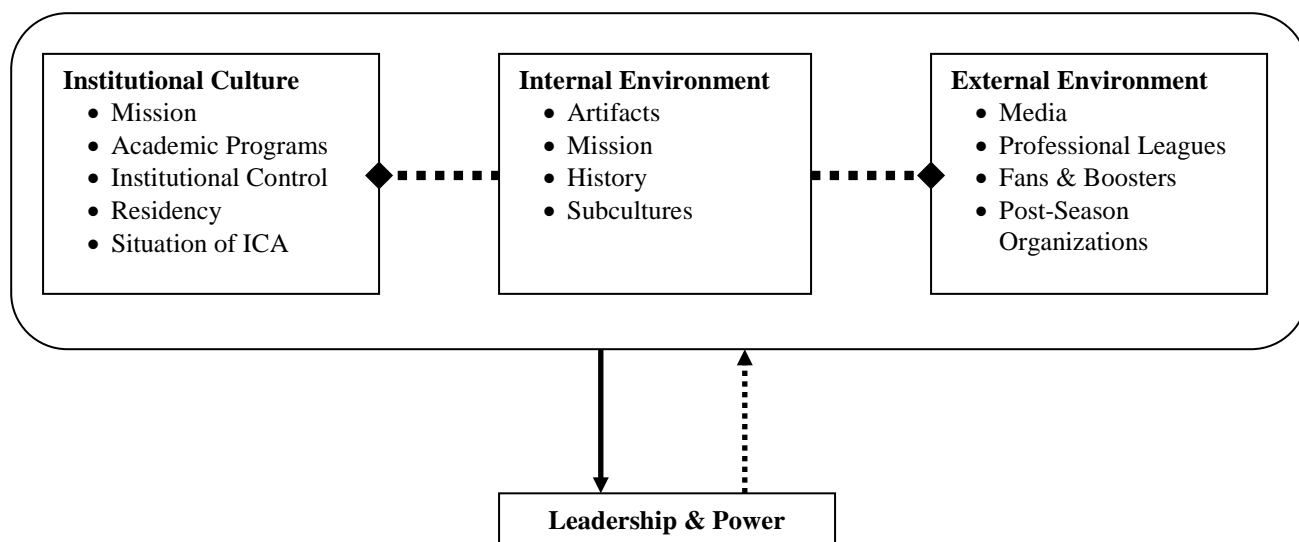


Table 1 - Beginning Questions for Investigating Culture in Intercollegiate Athletic Departments

Element of Culture	Key Questions
Institutional Culture	<p>What is the mission of the college/university?</p> <p>Is the institution private or public? What are the residency requirements?</p> <p>What are the values and assumptions of the institution?</p> <p>How does the university structure the athletic department?</p>
External Environment	<p>What is the scope of the department's environment?</p> <p>What externalities influence the department?</p> <p>How intense are the department's interactions with the environment?</p> <p>What does the department gain or contribute to the environment?</p>
Internal Environment	<p>What is the history of the department?</p> <p>What is the mission of the department?</p> <p>What memberships does the department maintain?</p> <p>What subcultures exist?</p>
Leadership & Power	<p>What symbols/artifacts exist? What meanings do they have?</p> <p>Who are the formal and informal leaders?</p> <p>What does the organization expect from its leaders?</p> <p>What are the main sources of power?</p> <p>How are decisions made?</p>

### *Institutional Culture*

Institutional culture is the starting point for understanding an athletic department's culture because it establishes cultural parameters. The university's mission, academic program, and admissions standards all affect its values and assumptions about intercollegiate athletics. Externally, these parameters will first influence the national organization (e.g., NCAA) of which the athletic department will be a member as well as the level at which its teams will compete within that organization (Robles, 2002; Ward & Hux, 2008). Secondly, these parameters will likely affect an institution's conference affiliation, defining the types of peer schools against which it will compete. Internally, these parameters will determine the manner in which the athletic department is situated within the university structure. An athletic department has more freedom to develop its own culture when structured as its own department. Departments housed within student life or linked with an academic department have less room to develop disparate values.

Other parameters can affect the department culture as well. A college's size and institutional control (i.e., private/public) can influence the number of fans an athletic department must deal with. Institutional control can also impact the way money is raised for intercollegiate athletics and the way that money is budgeted. Even things like the beauty and residency requirements of a college can influence a department's values. Combined all of these elements of the broader institution ultimately influence the actions taken by administrators, coaches, and athletes that lead to athletic department values and assumptions (Sperber, 2000a).

### *External Environment*

The other anchor for an intercollegiate athletic culture is the external environment. The external environment is a critical element for understanding culture because it can infiltrate every aspect of an athletic department. Fans, alumni, and boosters have developed what Duderstadt (2000) has described as a, "fascination, almost fixation, with college sports" (p. 252). He further contends that media, sponsors, post-season organizations, and professional leagues enable this fascination to, "become almost pathological" (p. 252). All these entities cannot only take actions that have consequences for athletic department values, but these actions can also alter stakeholder perceptions of the athletic department.

The power of the external environment is magnified exponentially by the extreme amount of media coverage garnered by athletic departments and the fiscal rewards available to top athletic programs (Duderstadt, 2000; Noll, 2004). The media publicity generated by top programs is unparalleled in higher education, but the internet is even allowing non-major programs to facilitate fan support and broadcast games. What results is an external environment in which even the smallest of actions can shape athletic department operations (Yow, 2009). Exerting even more sway is the amount of resources available from the external environment. The millions of dollars that can be gleaned from media, sponsors, boosters and post-season appearances can entice leaders into making changes that are inconsistent with department assumptions (Thamel, 2004).

Governing bodies are external influences that have been demonstrated to constrain department cultures (Southall & Nagel, 2003; Southall, Wells, & Nagel, 2005). Groups like the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), NCAA, and their member conferences develop rules that restrict the actions of administrators, coaches, athletes, and

boosters. Furthermore, the punishments such organizations dole out for breaking these rules can alter the values of an athletic culture. Governing bodies can also make decisions that have fiscal ramifications for departments. Those institutions that benefit from such decisions may be in a better position to uphold their core values and assumptions (e.g. post-season selection). On the other hand, departments that regularly suffer from the decisions of governing bodies may begin to develop assumptions and values around their 'outsider' or 'mid-major' status.

### *Internal Environment*

Superficially, an athletic department's culture is a function of the institutional culture and the external environment, but the internal environment of the athletic department has many cultural determinants as well. The mission, artifacts, subcultures, and history that emanate from within moderate the manner in which the external forces are balanced against the institutional culture. Athletic departments are beset with artifacts like mascots, logos, slogans, cheers, rituals, and ceremonies, yet the meanings of such artifacts are often difficult to determine for an outsider (Beyer & Hannah, 2000). To shed significant light on the real assumptions of a culture, the true meanings of such artifacts must first be deciphered. Then, these meanings can be compared to the department's stated mission in order to assess the homogeneity of the culture.

The power of symbols and values is often rooted in an organization's history (Martin & Siehl, 1983; Schein, 2004; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Those sports with successful traditions may have a greater ability to sway departmental values, and programs that have historical links to the external environment or the institutional culture can exert cultural influence in either respective direction. However that historical sway can be overpowered by the subcultures within the department. Southall et al. (2005) have indicated that subcultures can arise from a variety of sources (e.g., male/female sports, revenue/non-revenue) and that each has the ability to accept, enhance, or challenge the assumptions of the entire athletic department.

### *Leadership & Power*

Any assessment of athletic department culture requires an accounting of leadership and power must because those with leadership are capable of negotiating and managing the cultural balance between the institution, department, and external environment. When considering leadership with respect to athletic department culture, three aspects of leadership must be assessed. First, the source of leadership must be pinpointed. This can be difficult in intercollegiate athletics because athletic cultures have both formal and informal leaders and stakeholders are not easily defined (Putler & Wolfe, 1999; Trail & Chelladurai, 2002). While athletic directors are the designated formal leaders, university presidents are regularly involved in athletic department decisions (Duderstadt, 2000; Hesburgh, 1990). Furthermore, informal sources emerge that can augment, alter, or undercut formal leadership. In some athletic department cultures, boosters and alumni attempt to use their financial power to perpetuate a set of values (Brownstein, 2001; Withers, 2006). In other department cultures, "power coaches" (Sperber, 2000b, p. 22) exert influence over a department's values, and in some cases their personas can come to embody the entire department or university culture (Jones, 2009).

The second element of leadership that must be acknowledged is how decisions are made and communicated (Tierney, 2008). While university decisions usually result from public, committee-driven processes, decisions in intercollegiate athletics are rarely as deliberate. The



environment of intercollegiate athletics can force leaders to make decisions (e.g., hiring coaches) rapidly and without all desired background information. While this situation is not uncommon for leaders in other organizations, the manner in which these decisions are communicated is unique. Modern technology and media coverage enable the processes and results of athletic department decisions to reach stakeholders with incredible speed (Brown, 2007).

Finally, the selection of leaders must be investigated when defining culture. The status of a particular culture can affect how it views the process of selecting a leader. Cultures seeking change may select leaders with contrasting value sets to move the organization in a new direction. For cultures looking for slight modifications, hybrid leaders, those with experiences both within and outside of a culture, may be poised for selection. Cultures desiring the perpetuation of cultural values and assumptions are likely to hire leaders from within who embody the culture (Schein, 2004; Trice & Beyer, 1993). However, if the culture has maladaptive values, selecting leaders who embrace them will only deepen the cultural problems (Schein). Beyer and Hannah (2000) indicate that this may be the root of the problems facing intercollegiate athletics.

### *Interaction of the Elements*

While the preceding elements will all be present at every college or university, they will interact differently at each institution to create a unique athletic department culture. However, the interaction of these elements yields three main tensions that are likely to be similar at every institution. First, within the internal environment, tension is undoubtedly going to arise among administrators, coaches, and athletes as they naturally negotiate the athletic department's values and assumptions. Not only are there numerous internal forces that impact internal values, but these forces are constantly evolving too. The second major tension occurs when the institutional culture and external environment each attempt to draw the athletic department's values in their respective directions. While the internal environment can certainly propel the department values in either direction, both cultural anchors can rapidly pull the cultural values to either side if left unchecked. Thus, the third major tension emerges when leaders manage the movement of the athletic department culture along that cultural continuum. Trice and Beyer (1993) contend that leaders can embody, change, or destroy cultures, but as the following case study will illustrate, managing these tensions requires a delicate combination of all three skills.

## **Case Study of Athletic Department Culture**

In order to illustrate the use of this model, the following section presents a case study of one athletic department's culture. A case study is defined "as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). The phenomenon, or the case, is the essence of the study, and the phenomena are often impossible to separate from their contexts (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). Therefore, the contextual boundaries (e.g. time, place) surrounding the case are also crucial for the researcher because they define, or "'fence in'" (Merriam, p. 27), what will and will not be examined.

Merriam (1998) contends that three distinct, yet related, features further define case studies. First, case studies bring an extreme "specificity of focus" (Merriam, p. 29) to a phenomenon. By definition, boundaries exist in a case study and therefore, the researcher is able to intensely hone in on the problem. Second, case studies are descriptive (Merriam). Although all

qualitative research is descriptive, case studies are especially illuminating because they enable as many details as possible to emerge in relation to the case and its boundaries. In addition, this thoroughness enables the interaction of the case's variables to be understood. Due to such description, the final distinguishing characteristic of case studies is that they are heuristic. In other words, case studies can lead to "the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known" (Merriam, p. 30).

Case studies are not bound by any particular methods of data collection. In fact, any and all forms of data collection can be used (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). However, case studies often rely primarily on qualitative forms of data collection since their assumptions focus on "insight, discovery, and interpretation" (Merriam, pp. 28-29). Among the most common forms of qualitative data collection are observations, interviews, and document reviews. Researchers are advised to employ all such forms of data collection to facilitate the intense description that characterizes the case study (Bogdan & Biklen). Furthermore, all forms of data collection must occur over an extended period of time to best understand the contextual boundaries of the case (Yin).

Case studies are especially well suited for the examination of organizational cultures for four major reasons. First, case studies are optimal for answering how and why questions (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). Researchers using this design gain access to the subjective aspects of a setting, can gather a wider array of data, and remain in the setting for an extended period of time. Thus, they are in an excellent position to describe and explain a phenomenon like organizational culture. Second, this approach is appropriate for researchers interested in process. Rather than focusing on an outcome, researchers can use the case study to understand the social interactions that lead to particular outcomes (Merriam). Third, the case study is superior to other qualitative designs when the phenomenon is unique. Organizational cultures are each unique and require a design that can account for their distinctiveness (Schein, 2004). Fourth, case studies have been widely used by sport sociology and sport management scholars to study various aspects of intercollegiate athletics (Adler & Adler, 1991; Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Meyer, 1990; Schroeder, 2000; Southall & Nagel, 2008).

### *Setting*

This study took place at Pacific Christian College (PCC) which was selected because its location permitted the access required for a case study (Merriam, 1998). PCC is a pseudonym for a private, evangelical Christian, liberal arts institution on the west coast (all other institutions and nicknames were also assigned pseudonyms). The college was founded in 1937 and moved to its current location in a wealthy, medium sized city in 1945. Christianity was not a prerequisite for student admission, but faculty members were required to sign a statement of faith. All 1,200 students were required to attend chapel three times per week and adhere to several community standards which restricted student behavior. Its 12 athletic teams competed in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and the college belonged to a conference whose members were also Christian institutions.

### *Participants*

Participant selection followed a snowball sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The athletic director at PCC was initially contacted and interviewed, and he facilitated interviews with other campus leaders, who then facilitated further meetings. A total of 19 campus members

were interviewed. The president and past president provided broad leadership perspectives of the college. Information concerning the academic life of PCC was garnered from the provost, admissions director, athletic-admissions liaison, a department chair and two informal faculty leaders. The athletic director, the sports information director and all but two full-time coaches provided athletic perspectives for the study. Four student athletes offered their views of both the academic and athletic facets of the college. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym at the request of the athletic director as well as to improve the honesty and depth of participants' responses (Seidman, 1998).

Data was collected over a one-year period from 2002 to 2003 for a broad study examining the college's culture. Data was collected primarily from semi-structured interviews with participants. Recorded interviews lasted from 35 minutes (student athlete) to 2 hours (athletic-admissions liaison). In general, the interviews attempted to ascertain the culture of the college, the culture of the athletic department, and the relationship between them. The provost was interviewed a second time, and follow-up e-mails were exchanged with four participants. Numerous games, practices, meetings and ceremonies were observed and field notes from each event were recorded. Internal documents related to the research questions were also collected (e.g. letters, admission brochures, game programs) throughout the study. Books and articles were also examined to gain historical information on the college. Finally, cultural information was gleaned from community newspaper articles, student newspaper articles, media guides and the PCC web site. Copies of relevant information were made and kept for analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

The primary means of data analysis was theorizing, which features four phases: perception, categorization, establishing linkages and speculation (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). In perception, transcripts, field notes, and documents were surveyed for potentially important bits of information, or "units of analysis" (Goetz & LeCompte, p. 168). The units of analysis were then grouped into categories based on similarities and differences. Those categories were broken down into subcategories in a second phase of categorization. Links and relationships between the categories and were established through written memos. In the final phase, speculation, the literature is used as a foundation to develop conclusions about new constructs and to interpret links and relationships.

Several steps were taken to ensure that the results of the study met the quality control standards of naturalistic, qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Triangulation of multiple forms of data was used to ensure credibility (Merriam, 1998). To establish transferability, "rich, thick description" (Merriam, p. 211) was provided, as was the social context for data collection. An extensive audit trail was kept to promote confirmability. A colleague in higher education administration helped provide dependability by serving as an adversary to challenge the emerging categories and themes.

### *Institutional Culture*

For most of its history, PCC experienced financial struggles. Its youth and small size limited PCC's alumni support and the college received no church-related funding because it was non-denominational. In addition, due to community pressure, the county government placed an enrollment cap on the PCC that prevented it from increasing enrollment to meet financial needs.

At the time of the study it only had an \$18 million endowment. Thus, PCC was a tuition-driven institution that regularly raised tuition and fees at rates above the national norms. In fact, the director of admissions claimed that PCC was, “honestly the most expensive Christian college in the country.”

To attract a student body willing and able to afford such an education, PCC focused on increasing its academic rigor. Originally, PCC was not well known outside the realm of Christian higher education. A majority of its early graduates went into the ministry or teaching. Several participants agreed with the men’s basketball coach who noted that Christian institutions were, “seen by the larger academy as nothing more than indoctrination machines” that were to be avoided by top academic students. But over the last 30 years, PCC took several steps to gain status as a premier liberal arts college. Admissions standards were increased, and the general education program was extensively revised. New buildings were constructed and faculty lines were added. The college also became a member of three prestigious higher education consortiums. As a result, PCC quality was lauded in publications like *US News and World Report* and *Barron’s Best Buys in College Education*.

The transformation into an academically elite liberal arts college was attributed to one leader: long-time president Sam Lessig. Lessig articulated what the track coach described as a “vision of excellence” whereby PCC would fill a perceived void in higher education by offering an education that was truly Christian and highly academic. As Lessig noted, “I think there is a place for, let's say a second-class academic Christian institution, but there should be at least a few that are first class. And there are not....somebody’s got to do it.” To accomplish this Lessig became nationally active on higher education committees to improve the school’s profile. Furthermore, Lessig empowered and inspired others on campus to alter the culture.

He wanted the faculty to be outstanding, he wanted to be outstanding in athletics, he wanted outstanding science, he wanted outstanding music...he was encouraging us [coaches], but he probably had the same talk with the faculty and everybody else. We want to be good at what we do. (Track & Field coach)

The resulting institutional culture reflected a balance between its burgeoning academic commitment and its Christian heritage. PCC’s academic assumptions were reflected in its selective student body, smaller student-faculty ratio, and its interdisciplinary general education program. On the other hand, the required faculty statements of faith, the mandated student chapel sessions, and the inclusion of 12 units of Christianity in the general education program supported the Christian heritage of the college’s culture.

### *Athletic Department Internal Environment*

The internal environment of Pacific Christian’s athletic department had very clear links to the college’s overall culture that were grounded in its mission statement. The mission was clearly evident upon entering the athletic office and expressed the desire to, “1) honor Jesus Christ in all that we do; 2) support and enhance the mission of Pacific Christian College; 3) provide the opportunity for a life changing experience; 4) compete at the highest level of our capability.” Many coaches acknowledged and referred to the mission, noting it was a foundation for actions and decisions within the athletic department. The women’s assistant basketball coach stated, “I feel like when his decisions are made, the mission is part of what we decide. And it gives us a common ground to stand on to make a decision.”

Adhering to this mission yielded significant levels of success for PCC. The athletic department had consistently finished among the top 15 NAIA athletic departments according to the *Sears Directors Cup* (now the *Learfield Sports Directors Cup*) (NACDA, 2008). Its teams won multiple national and conference championships, and its athletes frequently garnered national recognition. Much of this athletic success was attributed the department's commitment to its mission and a heritage of quality coaches who were praised for starting the tradition of excellence at Pacific Christian. The men's soccer program was the only NAIA program in the country that had three coaches with over 100 career wins, and its most successful coach is in the NAIA Hall of Fame. A former men's basketball coach is another member of the NAIA Hall of Fame whose honorary plaque notes that he guided, "the Mariner athletic programs into the forefront of NAIA athletics." The cross-country coach was a member of the NAIA Cross Country Hall of Fame. Some of the college's successful former coaches had moved into teaching and administrative roles and therefore continued to influence the tradition of Mariner athletics.

The success of the programs was celebrated with numerous artifacts and ceremonies. The foyer of the gym contained a hall of fame honoring top coaches, athletes, and administrators. It also featured plaques of all-Americans, and top teams as well as the trophies won by those teams. Inside the gym, large felt banners were hung commemorating national champions, national qualifying teams, district champions, and conference champions. The college also used ceremony to celebrate its success. Banners were unfurled during half time of the men's basketball games to ensure a large, public crowd. Each team had its own banquet and a booster hosted a year-end banquet honoring the top athletes and scholar-athletes at an ocean-view resort.

Emerging out of the internal environment was an intangible sense of tradition. Athletes, like one men's basketball player, maintained a sense of pride and felt that, "there is something different about us." When competing it was important for them to, "try to represent the quality and tradition of Pacific Christian" (men's basketball player). This tradition was most evident when PCC competed against two rival Christian schools in men's basketball and men's and women's soccer. The campus newspaper had extensive coverage leading up to the games, tickets were sold out in advance, and student support was boisterously creative. The men's basketball coach summarized:

I think our athletes would say it's been wonderful being part of this tradition. And the tradition is not simply athletics....What he meant by tradition was more than just the wins and losses and wearing the uniform, but it was how that all fits together.

### *External Environment*

Although Pacific Christian is a small college, the external environment exerted influence on the culture of its athletic department in three ways. First, American society's fascination with sport impacted the culture. Second, boosters, fans, and alumni had an effect on the department's values and assumptions because the department was under-funded. Third, media was the most important external influence on the athletic culture.

Sport is a major social institution in this country (Eitzen & Sage, 2003), and both the athletic director and provost noted that American culture had also come to view sports as a key part of the college experience. The provost explained:

We are part of a culture that has already put the college experience and athletics together. ...So our challenge is do we let that presence of athletics be something that hangs out over here or do we bring that into our institutional vision?

According to the president, this cultural fascination manifested itself as, “a source of spirit or an esprit de corps on campus” that was attractive to prospective students. Furthermore, sports events were seen as a way to draw community members to campus due to their popularity. Well-known athletes were also used as a means of connecting PCC to community charity organizations by helping promote their respective causes.

Second, many at PCC felt that strong athletic teams enabled the college to connect with alumni, boosters, and, to a small degree, sponsors. Due to the financial limitations of the college, this link to the external environment was critical. PCC athletic programs were not well-funded and had difficulty providing budgets and scholarships at levels equitable with its peer institutions. The chair of the faculty senate believed that sport “helps maintain connections with your alums,” and the director of athletic development noted that, “there are certain businesses and programs...that certainly drop a ton of money into us as a nonprofit” because, “they believe in what we're doing.” As a result, the athletic director spent significant amounts of time learning, “how to cultivate those kinds of situations.”

Third, media coverage of PCC athletic teams was perhaps the most significant external influence on the department culture. The local newspaper provided significant amounts of coverage to PCC teams. Minimally, the results of every sporting event were listed each morning, and the paper frequently ran articles chronicling the games or matches with quotes from the coaches and players. When PCC's teams performed especially well, the paper even placed the news in a header above its front-page logo. The local electronic media also provided publicity. Local radio broadcasted some men's basketball and soccer games and included PCC scores and interviews in its daily sports report. Scores of basketball, soccer, baseball, and volleyball were always reported on the news and occasionally included highlights and interviews.

The sports programs also gained attention from the national media on occasion. Reports of the women's soccer team winning the national championship appeared in the *USA Today*, and it was carried on the *Associated Press* wire. The athletic department's overall success also gained media attention via the *Sears Director's Cup*. The Sears Cup standings of the top-20 schools were run in the *USA Today* four times per year and Pacific Christian was always mentioned because it was regularly in the top-15. The men's basketball team was also briefly profiled in *Sports Illustrated* as one of several teams running a unique style of offense.

### *Leadership & Power*

Leadership of the athletic culture at Pacific Christian came from two places: the administration and coaches. Administrators regularly communicated with athletic leaders and made decisions that influenced the athletic culture. The administration's active involvement was best demonstrated by their attendance at a conference entitled *Intercollegiate Athletics and the Christian College*. Seven leaders, including the president, provost, athletic director, and general counsel partook in sessions such as *Intercollegiate Athletics: Sport, Play, or Work?* and *Intercollegiate Athletics at Consortium Institutions: More Than Mere Fun and Games*.

Practically, the athletic director was in regular contact with the provost because she dealt with all personnel matters involving coaches including tenure and promotion. The kinesiology chair was often involved in athletic department discussions to help balance teaching and

coaching loads. The admissions office had a designated admissions/athletic liaison who was in regular contact with the coaches regarding recruiting and admissions. Furthermore, the athletic director stated that he visited with the vice president for advancement twice a month to, “get connected and get on the same page” for fundraising efforts. The provost commented on the importance of leader communication:

...this does not work perfectly. It's complicated and all I can say is that we really struggle and even though we want to keep these two worlds together, there are definitely tensions. [The athletic director] and I were dialoguing the other day about you know how to sort of think about the contracts ... But you see even the fact that that dialogue is going on is a manifestation of the values that we seek to hold and keep together.

The president did not take regular actions with the athletic department, but he did intervene in athletic issues when necessary. He often attended games and ceremonies, and when doing so, he consistently celebrated PCC's mission. For example, an observed speech at an annual awards dinner was loaded with references to the strong faith demonstrated by athletes. This was a message that athletic leaders received, and transmitted to the members of their culture. The athletic director claimed, “I think when you've got a president who articulates the mission of our college the way George Dawson does, yeah it's easy for us just to raise our hands, stand up and say, ‘We'll do it.’”

Coaches were the primary source of leadership for the athletic department. PCC employed 12 coaches, (11 were full-time employees) most of whom came to college because of its Christian perspective. As the volleyball coach indicated, “Volleyball was the focus at Division I. Here it's God, family, education, and then volleyball.” This approach led to long successful tenures for most coaches as all but one coach had been at PCC for over five years. The department featured winners of five national coach of the year awards, 13 regional coaching awards, and seven conference honors in every sport except baseball. Every coach had other duties in the college. This was referred to as the “teacher-coach model.” In this model, eight of the coaches had some teaching responsibilities (some as much as 50%), most in the kinesiology department. Others served in the following capacities: groundskeeper, intramural director, fundraiser, athletic director, assistant athletic director, director of summer camps, and public relations assistant.

Due to the teacher-coach model, coaches were well-versed in the academic and spiritual lives of the college. The women's soccer coach stated, “I mean we are out there. We're in the faculty forums. We're in the faculty meetings. You know we are participating in the discussion about the life of the mind, and I think the faculty appreciate that.” In addition, the coaches were pointed about integrating Christian values into their programs. Coaches commonly used prayer, Bible readings, and Christian parables in practice and games to link sport and religion. As a result, former president Lessig believed that “a majority of our PCC athletes are stronger in faith as a result of the athletic experience.”

### *Interaction of the elements*

What emerged out of the interaction of these elements were three basic assumptions that formed the foundation for PCC's athletic department culture. Two of these assumptions enabled the athletic department to have clear links to the college's institutional culture. A third assumption enabled the department to capitalize on its connections to the external environment.

Although this cultural balance was not without tensions, they were effectively managed through the leadership of coaches and administrators.

The foundational assumption of the athletic culture at PCC was the existence of a divine relationship between faith and athletic abilities. Athletes were seen as “blessed” with athletic talent and honored God through the sport experience in numerous fashions. Coaches perpetuated this assumption by using faith in their coaching and role modeling the integration of faith and sport. Coaches and athletes also based their actions off a second assumption that sport was “a laboratory” in which athletes were able to grow spiritually by exploring Christian values. Due to the unpredictability of sport, athletes were in positions to be physically, emotionally, and intellectually challenged. Guided by “teacher-coaches” athletes learned to rely on faith to overcome such challenges. Although the president indicated that, “the winning part really takes second place,” there were clear indications that winning was a third basic assumption of PCC’s athletic culture. PCC’s athletic tradition was based on success and it was celebrated with numerous artifacts. In addition, the one coach with a poor record during the study was fired while another coach with a winning record, but a style described by another coach as “unbecoming of the institution,” was retained.

These core assumptions of the athletic culture enabled it to serve as what Martin and Siehl (1983) would call an enhancing subculture of the institution. The two faith-based assumptions demonstrate the athletic department’s fervent support of the college’s Christian heritage. These were assumptions that the coaches readily acted upon. Even among campus skeptics, PCC’s coaches gained respect and garnered support for their ability to ground athletic participation in Christian values. In fact, athletes and coaches were cited as role models for the college’s goal of integrating Christian faith in all aspects of life. Even the provost indicated that, “I think the model that athletics has, the values of the athletic culture, are good for the community.” Athletic success was highly valued because it helped the college move toward its goal of academic legitimacy. PCC teams marketed the college, attracted booster and alumni donations, and improved community relations. Furthermore the assistant admissions director indicated that this success communicated the college in a manner consistent with its desired image of becoming the “Stanford of Christian colleges.”

Adhering to these assumptions did not occur without tensions. Two were clearly troublesome for the athletic culture. First, in the quest for academic legitimacy, the college increased the admission standards for athletes. Second, the president sought to realign PCC with the NCAA’s non-scholarship Division III as a way of improving its peer group. The local Division III conference featured some of the top liberal arts colleges in the country, and the president felt that being affiliated with them athletically would have improved PCC’s public image. Coaches saw both moves as threats to their ability to attract top recruits. The admission standards restricted their pool of prospective recruits, and the inability to offer scholarships to recruits would have hindered their ability to achieve the success valued by the college.

The fact that PCC did not reclassify its athletic department with NCAA Division III exemplifies the importance of leadership for athletic department cultures. Leaders carefully negotiated the tensions of the athletic subculture by working to integrate, embody and structure their beliefs about the role of intercollegiate athletics. To integrate athletics into the institutional culture, leaders communicated frequently across subcultures to keep the athletic leaders academically involved. Embodiment occurred as academic leaders paid attention to athletics, hired coaches who embraced these assumptions, and athletic leaders role modeled the Christian



assumptions of the institution's culture. Finally, PCC's leaders used the teacher-coach model to structure the athletic program consistent with their assumptions about intercollegiate athletics.

### *Conclusion*

Intercollegiate athletics are rife with problems that emerge out of cultural misalignment. Beyer and Hannah (2000) have suggested that, “a central challenge for those who would reform intercollegiate athletics is to recognize and deal with these cultural characteristics” (p. 127). The purpose of this article was to offer a model for assessing these cultural characteristics within intercollegiate athletic departments. An example of one athletic department’s culture was provided to illustrate the application of this model.

The case illustrates that the value conflicts apparent at the NCAA Division I-A level can also be evident at lower levels of intercollegiate competition. However, the sources of these values conflicts vary. While most previous research has highlighted external explanations for these conflicts, this case indicates that public perception, academic quality, history, and tradition can also be sources of value conflict at institutions large or small. In particular, institutional culture emerged as a critical determinant of an athletic department’s culture in this case. Frey (1994) has suggested that the “athletic department is a peripheral subunit of the university” (p. 115) operating on its own independent values. Yet this case seems to reflect the findings of those (Baxter et al., 1996; Mahony et al., 2002; Shulman & Bowen, 2001) who contend that athletic department assumptions may be heavily dependent on values of the institutional culture.

The case study also offers clear evidence of leadership’s role in determining athletic department cultures. At the NCAA Division I-A level, external leaders (i.e., NCAA president, television executives) often establish the parameters upon which individual athletic departments operate (Southall et al., 2008; Southall and Nagel, 2008). While the external influences were certainly less wealthy and powerful than those evident at the Division I-A level, this case demonstrates that internal leaders can create consistent assumptions between their universities and athletic departments by working collaboratively and regularly to do so. The leaders in this study—president, provost, athletic director, admissions director, and coaches—were able to keep the athletic and college cultures consistent by resolutely embodying the Christian assumptions.

Even though PCC is a small college program, its case clearly illustrates the need for a cultural framework specific to intercollegiate athletic departments. Only through a holistic viewing, can true department assumptions be uncovered. In this case, the true assumptions guiding the athletic department were centered on Christianity. But PCC arrived at those assumptions because its leaders understood the external pressures, the institutional culture, the internal environment of the athletic department and were able to find an ideology that would link them all together. Leaders then spent significant time and energy embodying the Christian assumptions to maintain cultural continuity. Finding and embodying those central values would certainly be much more difficult at Division I institutions where there are more stakeholders, subcultures, and interested externalities. However, discovering fundamental values in athletic departments at all competitive levels would be much easier with a framework that permitted a holistic cultural examination. Without this, leaders may “only treat symptoms of the dysfunctions...rather than...its underlying ideologies” (Beyer & Hannah, 2000, pp.124-125).

There are caveats for any cultural model that leaders and researchers must acknowledge. First, every athletic culture is context bound. Each athletic department will maintain its own unique assumptions, and its leadership will materialize in different ways. Clearly the religious

assumptions upon which PCC built their culture would simply not apply to other institutions. Second, the elements of the model are neither static nor mutually exclusive. Culture, as Geertz (2000) notes, is an interconnected web of relationships. Alterations that arise in one segment (e.g., increase in admissions standards), are necessarily going to affect other parts of the organization (e.g., athlete recruitment). Third, any cultural model should not be expected to provide linear solutions for simple problems. This model will not provide a recipe for solving the problems of intercollegiate athletics. Instead, its purpose is to arm leaders and researchers with a practical framework for uncovering athletic department cultures and the complex problems within them.

While this model outlines the essential elements of an athletic department's culture, each element needs further definition and refinement. Development of this model should be an augmentative process that builds on the insights of future research. Such research could include understanding how subcultures within the internal environment influence department values, uncovering the impact of history on department culture, applying this model to athletic departments of various sizes and competitive levels. Answering these and other questions will undoubtedly provide a stronger and more comprehensive framework. By doing so, leaders and researchers in intercollegiate athletics will be better equipped to change those athletic departments whose values are inconsistent with their host institutions.

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