From Rhetoric to Reality: NCAA Division I Athletic Department Mission Statements and Student-Athlete Community Service Efforts

Emily J. Andrassy
Wahine Beach

Jennifer E. Bruening
University of Connecticut

With the growing emphasis in higher education on developing character and social responsibility, the NCAA CHAMPS/Life Skills program commitment to service is of interest as it encourages the development of well-rounded student athletes. In framing the current study, the researchers focused on how the communication of an athletic department’s mission impacts the community service activities for athletes. Mission statements are used to communicate the central purposes of organizations (Bart, 1996) to various internal and external audiences. Through website content analysis, this investigation reveals the importance placed upon service across athletic departments through the mission, and determines the effect of such goals on opportunities provided and action taken by members of the athletic department. The findings suggest a connection between the mission and action in regard to community service but indicate that the amount of service performed is not always a reflection of the mission statement in regards to community outreach.

Introduction

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has long supported the mission of higher education institutions. After a series of scandals in college sports appeared to threaten the integrity of colleges and universities, the trustees of the Knight Foundation turned their attention to Intercollegiate Athletics forming the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics in 1989. Under co-chairmen Theodore Hesburgh and William Friday, the commission’s goal was to improve the state of intercollegiate athletics through a reform agenda encouraging, among other things, greater focus on the welfare of student athletes (Hesburgh & Friday, 1991).

Over time, the Knight Commission came to recommend that the goals and principles set forth by the department of intercollegiate athletics be a derivative of the university mission. Additionally, the commission stepped beyond mere missions, which could remain unsupported or not enacted, into organizational culture. The commission demanded that universities and their athletic departments put “principles into action” by moving reform from “rhetoric to reality” (Hesburgh & Friday, 1991, p. 35).
As a result of recommendations from the Knight Foundation and efforts internally at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the NCAA Foundation and Division I Athletic Directors’ Association created the Challenging Athletes’ Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS/Life Skills) Program for student-athletes in 1991. Then, in 1994, the NCAA launched the program for their entire membership with 46 initial participating institutions (NCAA, 2008). This program has grown to over 600 member institutions during the past fourteen years1. With a mission to ensure the integration of intercollegiate athletics in the campus educational program and enhance the quality of the student-athlete experience, the NCAA provides resources and support that enable member institutions to meet the needs of their student-athletes. Through speakers, workshops, community outreach efforts, and both academic and athletic services, the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program promotes personal accountability, leadership skills, and a respect for diversity among student-athletes.

The CHAMPS/Life Skills Program mission is served through a focus on five areas that have been identified as instrumental to the total development of the student-athlete including academic excellence, athletic excellence, personal development, career development, and service (NCAA, 2007). In particular, and with the growing emphasis in higher education on developing character and social responsibility (George, 2001), the CHAMPS/Life Skills commitment to service is of interest. This commitment encourages student-athletes to give back to their communities through partnerships with local non-profits and incentives for participation in community service events. The role of these service experiences in the overall development of the student has been documented:

Participating in service enhanced the undergraduate student academic development, life skill development, and sense of civic responsibility. The short-term effects of volunteer service during undergraduate years also persisted beyond college for at least five years. (George, 2001, p. 35)

The NCAA Education Services staff understands the role of service and offers support for CHAMPS/Life Skills Coordinators at member institutions in the form of an assessment that prioritizes the needs of the student-athletes, an administrative guide with evaluation instruments, online teaching materials from nationally recognized providers and supplemental programming resources (NCAA, 2007). And while a CHAMPS/Life Skills listserv promotes ongoing conversation among administrators about best practices or helpful resources (NCAA, 2007), the funding, staffing, and needs of the student athlete population vary across campuses making a NCAA-mandated level of service difficult.

As a consequence of an absence of an NCAA-mandated level of service, the resulting depth and breadth of service programming also varies across campuses. The commitment to promote and encourage civic engagement, when present, is often publicized in the athletic department mission and vision. Over time, organizations have relied on mission statements to communicate a unified purpose to both members and stakeholders (Bartkus, B., Glassman, M, & McAfee, B., 2002; VanderWeyer, 1994). The philosophical beliefs of an organization, as reflected through its leader and/or leadership team, are also embedded in the mission statement (Brunnermeier, & Veldkamp, 2008; Ireland & Hitt, 1992). In fact, the essential method by which leaders establish their own role is by establishing a mission statement and then enacting policies, procedures and programs that reinforce and advance that mission (Meacham & Gaff, 2006). The mission statement then has the potential to become the “necessary condition for
many different individuals to pull together through a myriad of activities to achieve central shared purposes” (Meacham & Gaff, 2006, p. 8) to form the identity of the organization. An athletic department mission that includes the mention of the community service involvement of athletes is established and publicized through the athletic department website, encourages partnerships with external organizations, and reinforces the CHAMPS/Life Skills mission. And, as added reinforcement, publicizing that mission on the department website for both internal and external constituencies to view becomes a means to communicate and potentially strengthen organizational identity (Crolley, 2008).

**Theoretical Framework**

In framing the current study, we focused on how the communication of an athletic department’s mission impacts the movement from “rhetoric to reality” (Hesburgh & Friday, 1991, p. 35). By focusing first on ritual communication as a means of transmitting organizational culture (Carey, 1975; 1989), the framework centers on two aspects: explicit (e.g., a written mission) and implicit (e.g., how the mission is operationalized in organizational culture and subsequent actions). While ritual communication is more often than not implicit, both aspects of ritual communication are of consequence as they compose the daily realities of organizational life. Within organizations, verbal and written forms of communication are central; however, in terms of implicit ritual, very “little or nothing will be dismissed as accidental” (Rothenbuhler, 2006, p. 14). Organizational members “read the observables as signs,” (Rothenbuhler, 2006, p. 14) meaning they interpret action or lack of action as purposeful.

Additionally, organizational members also observe and respond to two levels of reality, the individual and the collective. People operate daily under a shared understanding of societal expectations: signification (i.e., languages), legitimation (i.e., values and norms), and domination (i.e., power or control over resources) (Sewell, 1992). But these collective structures, or social forces, can only operate through individuals who expect and enact them (Rothenbuhler, 1988). Structuration theory (Giddens, 1976; 1979; 1984; 1989) speaks to this complex relationship between the individual and the collective. Structuration addresses the continuation, reproduction, and/or transformation of structures through the communication practices, or rituals, of people within an organization. For example, as a CHAMPS/Life Skills coordinator communicates with community partners to establish the community service activities for the athletes in his/her program, he/she can continue with the existing structure of activities, reproduce the service structure by adding other activities that are similar in focus, or transform the structure by reaching out to new community partners and/or implement new activities. As such, structuration has been used to frame studies of small group communication (Poole, Siebold & McPhee, 1985; Sunwolf & Siebold, 1998) and organizational politics and culture (Keough & Lake, 1993; Mumby, 1987; Whitmer, 1997).

Structuration is grounded in the duality of structure, or a balancing of the role of existing structures and the exercise of human agency in altering those structures. So structural context (i.e., language, values, power) guides human action, but this structural context can also be modified by human action. Durkheim speaks to this duality when he observes that voluntary action can be explained by the integration of social and cultural systems into individual choices (Jones, 1986). As an example, expectations to develop the complete student-athlete including his/her role in the community are communicated in an athletic department’s mission statement, a mission statement being an almost universal explicit ritual communication in organizations.
This collective structural context can encourage and guide individuals such as administrators, coaches, and student-athletes to be civicly engaged. However, if resources and actions (i.e., implicit ritual communication) do not follow these expectations then those individuals are constrained by the structure.

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of the current study is, through website content analysis, to gather information relating to the community service practices of student-athletes at select NCAA Division I institutions. Specifically this study will address the question: Is the commitment to service by university student-athletes a reflection of service goals, or lack thereof, in the athletic department mission statement? This investigation will reveal the importance placed upon service across university athletic departments through the stated mission and goals, and determine the effect of such goals on both opportunities provided and action taken by members of the athletic department.

**Literature Review**

*Mission Statements*

Multiple studies have examined how organizations, and departments and divisions within these organizations, communicate who they are and what they do (Falsey, 1989) through the use of mission statements (Carruthers & Lott, 1981; Davies, 1986; Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Keller, 1983; Lang & Lopers-Sweetman, 1991; Lenning & Micek, 1976; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Newsom & Hayes, 1991; Schwerin, 1980). In describing organizations’ central purposes and essential activities (Bart, 1996), mission statements have various internal and external audiences (e.g. college athletic departments communicate with trustees, alumni, faculty, students, community stakeholders) as well as various components. Bart and colleagues (Bart & Baetz, 1998; Bart & Tabone, 1998) operationalized those components as follows: identification of the relevant stakeholders (Bates & Dillard, 1991; Collins & Porras, 1991; Ireland & Hitt, 1992; Klemm, Sanderson, & Luffman, 1991; Wilson, 1992); specifying some general, non-quantitative goals (Collins & Porras, 1991; Klemm et al., 1991; Want, 1986); providing a definition of success (Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Ireland & Hitt, 1992; Klemm et al., 1991; Want, 1986); identifying the organization’s philosophy (Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Drucker, 1973; Ireland & Hitt, 1992); and identifying important behavior standards (Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Want, 1986).

In addition to conveying who an organization is and what they do, a mission statement can also outline goals, plans to reach those goals, as well as priorities, values, and beliefs that make the organization distinct (Abrahams, 1995; Collins & Porras, 1991; Falsey, 1989; Ireland & Hitt, 1992; Klemm et al., 1991; Pearce & David, 1987). Although some see a mission statement as more narrow in focus, utilized “solely as a communication tool” (Bartkus, Glassman, & McAfee, 2000, p. 29), organizations have been urged to create mission statements “to guide current, critical, strategic decision making” (Drohan, 1999). This guidance is also aided by mission statements that provide leadership by informing employees about organizational goals to unify their efforts toward accomplishing those goals (Bart, 1996; Ireland & Hitt, 1992; Klemm et al., 1991; Pearce & David, 1987), offering support for resource
allocation decisions (Bart, 1996; David, 2007) and generating enthusiasm about the organization (Bartkus et al., 2000; Collins & Porras, 1991; Ireland & Hitt, 1992).

As such, mission statements reflect culture and ideology (Swales & Rogers, 1995). The mission statement expresses “common interests shared by organizational members, fosters commitment to the organization and cultivates member identification with the organization” (Bonewits Feldner, 2006, p. 12). Because a mission statement is so intertwined with organizational culture, the mission statement has the potential to give meaning to the organization. But, as Fairhurst (1993) highlights, organizational members can see inconsistencies between the rhetoric and reality of the mission, or the difference between how the mission is communicated and the actual practices of the organization. Covey (1991) discusses the importance of consistency within an organization, specifically that structure, mission statement, values, and philosophies must be “aligned” with one another. In such settings, leaders and members internalize the organizational mission (Kane-Urrabazo, 2006) and there is rarely contradiction between what is said and what is done.

Institutions of Higher Education

As the environment surrounding corporations has become more difficult, mission statements have taken on increased importance and have been examined with increased scrutiny (Desmidt, Prinzie, Henne, 2008). Higher education in general and college athletics specifically are no different. Concerns surrounding budgets and increased demands for accountability have been coupled with the “the influx of corporate pressures and business realities into educational endeavors” (Bonewits Feldner, 2006, p. 79). The increasingly corporate nature of higher education is apparent (Bart & Tabone, 1998; Deetz, 1992; Giroux, 1999). Labaree’s (1997) three goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility have been utilized to examine the communication of mission by colleges and universities (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). However, variation according to institutional type has been identified. For instance, private colleges and universities focus more on democratic equality (e.g. engaging students in the community), while public institutions view service as workforce development, or a combination of social efficiency and social mobility where the benefits are experienced both by the students and the community, but are primarily economic (Abelman & Dalessando, 2009; Boerema, 2006; Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

Athletically related research on college and universities also establishes differences between institution type and mission with a similar underlying concern with economic gain. Fink, Pastore, & Reimer (2003) found distinct indications of philosophical approaches to college athletics in the mission statements of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I and III institutions (NCAA, 2009). While both divisions prioritize academic excellence and opportunity, Division I schools showcase a model based on providing entertainment and achieving national prominence (Fink, Pastore, & Reimer, 2003). Division III mission statements focus instead on the holistic development of the student-athlete.

In searching for more evidence of holistic development, Meacham and Gaff (2006) surveyed the mission statements for institutions listed in the Princeton Review’s The Best 331 Colleges and were able to find 312 institutional mission statements. Of these 312, two phrases were identified that speak to democratic equality through community involvement. Eighty-nine institutions included social responsibility in their missions and fifty-three made mention of engaged, responsible citizenship in a democratic society. However, the researchers found little
evidence of mechanisms, either programmatic or within course curricula, to move students toward these mission statement ideals. Meacham and Gaff (2006) did find that many campuses were in the planning and developmental stages of service learning and engagement opportunities while a few others have moved forward even further with leadership courses and “student-life programs emphasizing the development of leadership skills” (Meacham & Gaff, 2006, p. 9). Disappointing though, these programs “tend to be on the margins of campus life and available to only a few students” (p. 10) and not be focused on developing a leadership brand (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2007).

Service and Personal Development

Following the findings of Meacham and Gaff (2006), other studies have investigated the mention of service in organizational mission statements. Williams (2008) examined the expression of goodwill among corporate mission statements. In citing the teachings of Aristotle, Williams discusses goodwill as one of the components of ethos, along with intelligence and character. Intelligence impacts a leader’s credibility while character can allow a leader to communicate the “characteristics and qualities that are valued by an audience and community” (Beason, 1991, p. 330). In doing so leaders are able to develop organizational members who assist in the demonstration of organizational ethos to the community at large. Collins and Porras (1991) explain the type of mission statement that might exist in an organization with such ethos “core values and beliefs are the organization’s basic precepts about what is important in both business and life, how business should be conducted, its view of humanity, its role in society, the way the world works, and what is to be held inviolate (p. 35).” The authors go on to say how crucial it is for organizations to not only articulate their values and beliefs, but to actually enact efforts to reinforce their commitment to goodwill within the community.

Methods

Mission statements offer unique insight into the purpose and vision of an organization (Hegeman, Davies, and Banning 2007). In examining corporate identity and mission statements, Cunningham, Cornell, and Coote (2009) acknowledge that the mission statement is “only a partial representation of expressed identity” (p. 69). But because of its function to articulate the purpose and vision, the mission statement is arguably communicating the most central and distinctive characteristics and values of the institution. Web content analysis of the departmental mission statements and community service practices allows for a broad and objective assessment of the central purpose and philosophical beliefs of NCAA Division I athletic departments.

Content analysis offers a systematic approach to evaluating written or spoken messages (Naccarato & Neuendorf, 1998). Content analysis facilitates an objective assessment of the language in the athletic department mission statements to quantify characteristics of the text (Yu, 2009) and allows for an examination of the occurrence of words and phrases within the text (Bolon, 2005). In our attempt to examine how the communication of the organizational mission impacts the movement from “rhetoric to reality,” we identify explicit commitments to service, and judge the effect on implicit community outreach levels. Through web content analysis we are able to observe how the language of the athletic department mission statement is operationalized by department members. Content analysis has been used often in research analyzing mission statements (e.g. Bolon, 2005; Cunningham et. al. 2009; Abelman &
Dallessandro 2009) and web content (e.g. Lim, Widdows, & Hooker 2009; Crolley, 2008). And as colleges and universities are recognizing the importance placed upon community service and volunteerism across the United States, many are including a service dimension in their department mission (Hellman, Hoppes, & Ellison, 2006).

To ensure the reliability and validity of this website content analysis, we followed the 11 step procedure for conducting content analysis proposed by Insch, Moore, and Murphy (1997). The first two steps involve identifying the research question and constructs, and identifying the texts to be examined. After formulating the research question –Is the commitment to service by university student-athletes a reflection of service goals, or lack thereof, in the athletic department mission statement? –we selected the colleges and universities that would be analyzed in this study. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participating conferences, which combine to represent a variety of public and private institutions from across the country. The sample was comprised of 80 schools in 7 NCAA Division I conferences: the Pacific-10, the Western Athletic Conference, the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference, the Mid-American Conference, the Big East, Ivy League, and the Atlantic 10 Conference. A total of 70 athletic department mission statements from these institutions were available through the athletic department websites. These mission statements were analyzed and compared to corresponding community outreach data. The mission statements represent a public communication of the organizational identity, and published community service projects and outreach practices inform the public of the department’s level of dedication to service and outreach.

The third step in conducting this content analysis involved specifying the unit of analysis, or in this case the departmental mission statements and community outreach data available on the athletic website of each institution. Website content is continuously being updated. To ensure consistency, all data for this study was collected during the spring of 2008 from the university athletic department web pages. After identifying the institutions that would serve as the sample for this study, the list of NCAA Division I colleges and universities were grouped by conference then divided between the two researchers for the data collection process. Athletic department uniform resource locators (URL) were obtained through links on the NCAA website, and a thorough search of each official athletic website ensued. To ensure uniformity in the retrieval process, the athletic department mission statement and information on community service was collected from the CHAMPS/Life Skills, Student Services, and Marketing Department web pages within the university or college athletic site. If the mission statement or community service information was not readily available, a search for mission statement or service through the internal search engine was employed. If this did not yield results, the search was deserted. Mission statements and community service data was copied and amassed into documents labeled by school and filed by conference. Vision statements and departmental objectives occasionally surfaced on the athletic website. In the case that supplemental goals, visions, or objectives were included with the Athletic Department Mission Statement, these were also collected with the mission statement for review.

Multiple discussions between the investigators ensued to devise the specification of categories (Step 4) and formulate the sampling coding schemes (Step 5). The initial overview of the data involved general observations about the content of the departmental mission statements and the breadth and scope of community service. Following this general analysis of the data gathered in this study, mission statements were categorized and coded based upon the presence or absence of a Commitment to Service, which is defined as an explicit intention to promote and encourage civic engagement. Specifically, the athletic department mission statements were
screened for any mention of service or community outreach. Small conference institutions highlighted community service in the mission statement through such text as, “promoting institutional pride through the pursuit of athletic excellence and service to the community” or “intercollegiate athletics program strives for excellence in academics, athletics, leadership and service to others while embracing the principles of good sportsmanship, ethical conduct and equity in opportunity.”

After pretesting (Step 6), we discussed our results to resolve ambiguities (e.g., can a commitment to service be implied in the mission statement without being stated) and purified our coding scheme (Step 7). During the pretest, the mission statements and supplemental vision or objectives were screened for any specific commitment to community service. The broad categories for the sample coding scheme in the pretest ensured greater reliability of the construct by assessing agreement between the two researchers. Revised categories were formulated based upon both manifest and latent content that aligned with McCarthy’s definition of community service: “Community service engages citizens in voluntary acts that are intended to improve communities and quality of life” (Hellman, Hoppes, & Ellison, 2006, pg. 29).

We then examined the data (Step 8). Based upon the revised coding scheme formulated using McCarthy’s definition of service, we screened the mission statements and supplemental goals, visions, or objectives for any mention of the following: community, service or service, outreach, engage or engagement, quality of life, benefit, responsibility, and preparing citizens or successful contributors to society. After the data was searched, the words were scrutinized in the original text to ensure the intent aligned with a commitment to service. The context of these words within the text determined if it qualified a school as having a commitment to community outreach. To ensure that the mission statements were taken in context, certain language disqualified a coding of Commitment to Service. A university mission statement that referenced community engagement, benefit to the community, or responsibility to community or others earned the coding of Commitment to Service, while creating a sense of community did not. Service to others qualified a coding of Commitment to Service, but customer service and support services did not. The words benefit and responsibility also surfaced quite often in the mission statements. These words were reflective of a commitment to community service in any context reflecting a concern for others, a benefit to society, or a civic responsibility. These words were excluded when in reference to fiscal responsibility, secondary benefits, or any other context unrelated to service or outreach.

We then assessed the reliability and validity of the research (Steps 9 & 10). We first created broad categories for our sample coding scheme and pre-tested the construct. This enabled us to assess agreement between the two researchers. When the data was recoded independently with the revised coding scheme, there was complete agreement between researchers. The test-retest method was used to ensure reliability when the data was reevaluated a second time by the same researcher. To ensure construct validity we developed categories based upon implied and explicit dedication to community service using McCarthy’s definition. The clearly defined language of this definition enabled us to easily identify and measure dedication to community service.

Finally, the university athletic departments were evaluated based upon the information about community service that was collected through their official website (Step 11: Analysis). The varied content of the community service web pages led the researchers to develop a scale to evaluate the department’s dedication to community outreach. Wide variations across the 70 institutions in the opportunities, publications, and management information made coding...
difficult. While some universities kept track of hours, others cited information about community partnerships, and still others made mention of the number of people served. Based upon early observations, two categories describing service commitment were developed as related to community partnerships, the size of the CHAMPS/Life Skills staff, and the breadth, duration, and frequency of community service.

In the initial analysis of dedication to service, athletic departments were broadly characterized either as having a modest commitment to service or as exhibiting a dedicated commitment of time and resources to community outreach. These two broad categories (Modest and Dedicated) were eventually expanded to four. Following the pretest, a purified coding scheme was developed to describe the level of commitment toward community service displayed by information obtained on athletic websites. Under the new coding scheme, community service data posted on athletic department webpages led to the categorization of the colleges and universities of No Commitment, Modest Commitment, Average Commitment, or as being Dedicated to community service based upon the number of community service projects identified, the presence of a CHAMPS/Life Skills competition involving community outreach, requirement for service by student-athletes or teams, and the presence of statistics on service including hours or people served.

The majority of athletic department webpages listed or described community service projects involving the department, teams, or student-athletes. For this reason, the number of service projects listed on the athletic department website became the primary basis for classification of the athletic department commitment to community service. The number of community service events most often cited on athletic webpages and the average number of service projects cited ranged from 3 to 5 community outreach projects. Thus, any athletic department citing between 3 and 5 community service projects was classified as having an Average Commitment to service. Departments that identified 1 or 2 community service projects are classified as having a Modest Commitment to service. The athletic departments that have cited 6 or more community service projects on their department webpages are classified as having a Dedicated Commitment to service. Finally, athletic department websites that do not describe any community outreach events are classified as having No Commitment to service.

Some athletic websites displayed other measures of commitment including the number of hours served, the number of youth and adults in the community engaged by service, the number or percentage of students involved in service, requirements for participation in community service, points awarded toward CHAMPS competition for individual or team involvement in service, a community service award, a list of service partners, the amount of funds raised for a community organization or cause, and list of upcoming community service events. Any record keeping of community service hours, community members reached, or the number of students involved in service is a display of dedicated commitment to service. In the case that such information was posted, the department was recognized as having a dedicated community outreach program, regardless of the number of service projects listed. Earning points toward team CHAMPS competition for community service projects also displays a higher commitment to promote service as one of the 5 pillars of life skills, and therefore also warrants a classification of Dedicated. Universities that posted requirements for community service, service learning, or coach evaluations based in part upon team involvement in community service also qualified a university as having a Dedicated Commitment to service.

The athletic departments that were coded as having a Modest Commitment to community outreach offered fewer than three examples of community service projects for the academic year,
had no information about a CHAMPS competition among teams that rewarded participation in community service to invoke student-athlete participation, and provided no information about the number of hours or community members served. For example, the athletic department at one institution in a minor conference was identified as having a modest commitment to community service for providing no name or contact information for an office within the department (e.g. CHAMPS/Life Skills, Compliance, Academic Advising) or an administrator responsible for community outreach. Furthermore, in the news stories relating to community service on the athletic department website, only two teams were mentioned as actively involved, both in conjunction with the same community partner. Dedicated programs, on the other hand, documented 6 or more community service projects. Additionally, these schools offered contact information for the administrator in charge of service, encouraged student-athletes to become involved using various marketing methods, sponsored student-athlete team based participation competition, and some even provided a training manual for student-athletes complete with outlining appropriate dress and behavior for community outreach engagements.

Summary of Findings

Of the 80 NCAA Division I schools identified for this study, a total of 70 athletic department mission statements were identified, analyzed and compared to corresponding community outreach data. Ten of the original 80 schools were not used in the study due to the lack of an athletic department mission statement or nonfunctioning websites. The sample used in this study included 14 institutions from the Big East conference, 13 institutions from the Atlantic 10, 11 institutions from the MAC, 9 institutions from the WAC, 8 institutions from both the MAAC and PAC 10, and 7 institutions from the Ivy League conference. A review of the mission and goals of each athletic department within the seven specified NCAA Division I conferences revealed that 42 of the 70 athletic departments committed to service or community outreach in their mission.

The findings suggested a connection between the stated mission and action in regard to community service. Of the 42 schools that mentioned community outreach in their athletic department mission, 34, or 81 percent, had Dedicated or Average Commitment to community service programming. Of those that did not mention a commitment to community service, over half, specifically 16 out of 28 or 57 percent, also touted a Dedicated or Average Commitment to community outreach programs with their student-athletes.

There were slight differences between the NCAA Division I major conference institutions (Big East, PAC 10) and minor conference departments (WAC, Atlantic 10, MAC, MAAC) in terms of an acknowledgement of service in the mission and dedication to community outreach in the actions of department members. Of the 22 schools in the major conferences, 15 referenced community service in the athletic department mission, and 13 of those 15 had average to dedicated community outreach programs. Overall 18 of the 22 major conference institutions, or 82 percent, boast dedicated community service programs. The minor conference schools totaled 48, and 27 schools mentioned service in the mission statement. Twenty one of the 48 minor conference schools both acknowledged a commitment to service and featured an Average Commitment or Dedicated community outreach program. Of the 48 institutions belonging to a smaller conference, 32 schools, or 67 percent, had an Average to Dedicated community service program.

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Discussion and Implications

While athletic departments that specifically reference community outreach or service in their mission are slightly more dedicated to service, there is evidence of a disparity between the stated mission and action taken by members of the athletic department in terms of community service and information published on the website. In other words, the rhetoric is far stronger than the reality when it comes to community service efforts. Or, if the explicit ritual communication and structure does not match with the implicit level of support, then a discrepancy will occur (Carey, 1975; 1989; Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1989). The results of this exploration indicate that in the case of the involved NCAA Division I institutions, the amount of service performed by members of the athletic department is not always a reflection of the mission statement in regards to community outreach.

The major conference institutions appear slightly more dedicated to community outreach, with 82 percent compared to 67 percent of the smaller conference institutions touting dedication to service. Participation in the NCAA CHAMPS/Life Skills Program, has grown to include almost every institution in NCAA Division I. As such, these universities have made a special commitment toward community service in their efforts to enhance the total experience of the student-athletes. But again, the reality of how many institutions are active in their communities diverges from what their mission states, evidence of what Rothenbuhler (1988) identified as a lack of individuals who expect the elements of the mission statement to be reinforced and have the resources to enact those elements.

Using website analysis as the data collection method for the current study might have underestimated the community service involvement of student-athletes at some universities. Some institutions with dedicated CHAMPS/Life Skills programs have multiple administrators in the athletic department working to encourage and facilitate service, and even more relevant to this study, staff who maintains the website with current service activities and events. By contrast, one minor conference institution has relatively few department sponsored outreach programs, but many of the student-athletes are involved in service on their own through projects run by the university (George, 2001; NCAA 2007). In this instance, the university has a mission to develop the whole person and provide opportunities for community outreach, and student-athletes are involved alongside the rest of the student body. The athletic department does not have the staff or resources to implement its own extensive service projects or to report on service that does occur, which in turn reduces the available information and publications about service by athletes on the athletic webpage. Although additional data may have shed greater light on the actual dedication to community service at some institutions, this research is part of a larger research project, and additional data was not available for this study.

The athletic departments of the 70 schools in this study provide excellent examples of creative opportunities and competitive incentives for participation in service. Many schools encourage community outreach by student-athletes through competition. At one major conference institution, students are awarded “spirit points” for community service, GPA, and attendance at events as part of a larger team competition. The competition culminates each spring with a barbeque for the winning teams hosted by the Academic Services staff. A small conference institution created a Community Outreach Committee, comprised of varsity student-athletes, club sports athletes, intramural, and recreational athletes that share an interest in sports and community service. This committee organizes events to bring students into the surrounding community. Some universities emphasize the importance of community outreach by including...
team service in the annual coaches’ evaluations. Other universities have high expectations and even mandates for student-athlete participation in service events throughout the year.

Aside from service, common themes in the athletic mission statements include preparing student-athletes for the future, operating a sound athletic program, and creating awareness for the athletic department and university. In particular, this last concept of creating awareness for the athletic department and university could be linked to service. If athletic departments considered community service as representative of their own and their university’s display of corporate social responsibility and a powerful marketing tool, perhaps service would be explicitly mentioned in their mission statement.

Another concept expressed by one major conference university athletic department expresses a commitment to the development of student-athletes through sports in their mission: “By committing ourselves to the personal development and well being of our student-athletes and staff. Those who participate at all levels will learn the benefits of teamwork, discipline, goal setting, physical fitness, healthy lifestyles, character development, self confidence, sportsmanship, and an appreciation for lifelong learning.” This commitment to the academic, physical, and emotional well being of student-athletes is shared across many institutions. Here, as in other instances, a commitment to the personal and moral development of student-athletes is embedded in the athletic department mission statement. Although no direct relationship to service or community outreach is stated, moral and ethical principles are a common thread among university athletic department mission statements that invoke high standards of personal development. Hellman, Hoppes, and Ellison (2006) cite the advantages of community service on the moral development of students, emphasizing that this process is heightened when service learning strengthens the students’ connection with the community they serve. Through community service, students experience personal growth, interpersonal development, and an enhanced commitment to civic engagement (Hellman et. al 2006). Community service may be a platform for a commitment to the development of character and social responsibility; thus, a commitment to the moral development of students may correlate to a departmental culture that encourages civic engagement. Of the 70 institutions, 57 of the schools mentioned community service, or both in their athletic department mission, and 36 of these schools, or 63 percent, had dedicated community outreach programs. On occasion, the mention of enhancing the ethical and moral development of student-athletes accompanies a commitment to community outreach within the mission statement text, but this is not always the case.

A comparison of religious institutions was used to determine the dedication of these private institutions toward community service in both the stated departmental mission and the actions of athletic department members. In research on Jesuit colleges and universities, Bonewits Feldner (2006) found that the mission focuses on “people who want to work in ways that help other people” (p. 1). The framework of education for the whole person (Lacznia & Palan, 2004) addresses the connection between service and personal development. Hartley and Morphew (2008) identified a trend among private colleges and universities to emphasize civic leadership in their mission statements while public universities more often focus on service to the economy. In their research and analysis of university mission and vision statements, Abelman and Dalessandro (2009) acknowledge that an institution’s orientation (e.g. religious affiliation) does impact culture and values, which are espoused in the mission statement. Furthermore, such institutions are guided by their mission and vision to a greater extent than other types of colleges and universities (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). All of the institutions with a religious affiliation examined in this study mentioned either a commitment to community service or a
dedication to the moral development of student-athletes. The small sample of religious institutions displayed dedication to service and emphasis on the integrity of the student-athletes. Of the 16 religious institutions analyzed in the study, 8 mentioned a commitment to community service and 12 (75 percent) demonstrated a dedicated commitment to community outreach. With 75 percent touting dedicated programs, religious institutions appear consistently more devoted to community service and the moral development of the student-athletes than public institutions as a whole.

**Limitations**

This study is an analysis of the information available on the athletic websites of participating universities and is limited by the priority placed on publicizing information about community service. Although some universities may be both invested in community outreach and dedicated to updating their webpage with current projects, other colleges may not have the commitment, resources or staff to maintain a webpage of information about the service completed by student-athletes and other members of the athletic department. Even when community service is a stated goal of the athletic department, publications of news and information relating to civic engagement may not be a priority. The volume of online information may be a reflection of the available staff and resources of the athletic department rather than the department’s actual commitment to service. Although not all universities pledged to serve the community in their official athletic mission and goals, many athletic departments asserted their commitment to community outreach elsewhere on the website. The lack of inclusion of a commitment to community service in the mission statement might indicate less of a priority being placed on service, or simply a different approach to how to demonstrate a commitment to service. Content analysis cannot determine which is the case; as such the results of the study may be limited.

The study was also limited by classifications of the dedication of athletic departments to community outreach. The varied content of the community service webpages led to a subjective evaluation of the department’s dedication to community outreach. Wide variations across the 71 institutions in the opportunities, publications, and management information available made coding difficult. While some universities kept track of hours, others cited information about community partnerships, and still others made mention of the number of people served. This data may provide the base of information necessary to create a guideline for future classifications.

**Future Research**

Additional research to confirm the information on the websites and gather supplemental data about community service by student-athletes may alleviate limitations of this study. Even when community service was a stated goal of the athletic department, publications of news and information relating to civic engagement may not have been a priority. The volume of online information may be a reflection of the available staff and resources of the athletic department rather than the department’s actual commitment to service.

Although not all universities pledged to serve the community in their official athletic mission and goals, many athletic departments asserted their commitment to community outreach elsewhere on the website. One university athletic department mission has no mention of the
importance of service to the community, but outreach is of importance to them as stated elsewhere on their website. In the community service section of the athletic website, the department states: “The University Athletics Department believes service within the community is important for enhancing the State, the City and surrounding communities. Through the involvement of coaches, administrators, student-athletes, cheerleaders and mascots, athletics is working together to make our community a strong one. Athletics is leading the way in education, athletics and community service.” This secondary mission may be present at many institutions, which, if included, could alter the results of this type of study. In addition, survey based research inquiring of university and athletic department representatives of how service is defined and how it relates to their stated mission, or why service is not explicitly mentioned in their mission, could shed light on the perceived gap between rhetoric and reality. How athletic departments interpret concepts such as personal and moral development in relation to service could be part of this inquiry as well.

Additionally, specifically asking university and athletic department representatives in a survey what role their being a public, private, or religiously affiliated university plays in their service mission could enhance the understanding of these potential differences. And, finally, survey questions could determine the impact of individual university and departmental leaders on both the stated mission and its application. Consider those institutions with a dedication to community service in the mission: does that mean commitment is handed down from the top? Intuitively, it would make sense that if service is reflected in the mission statement then the athletic director is supportive. Consider next when service is not in the mission but the athletic department is dedicated to working in the community regardless: is that dedication the result of a senior or mid-level administration who acts as a steward? Investigating possible links to CHAMPS/Life Skills directives or individual leadership on the part of an administrator would be another future direction for the research begun in the current study.

References


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**Footnotes**

1 As of 2010 the total number of CHAMPS/Life Skills members was 661. NCAA, 2008.