The Role of Policy, Rituals and Language in Shaping an Academically Focused Culture in HBCU Athletics

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Increasing the graduation rates of student athletes is one of the more visible NCAA academic goals. Overall student-athlete graduation rates have improved significantly among many institutional members. However, Historically Black College and University (HBCU) student-athlete graduation rates lag considerably behind. Although the NCAA asserts that a causal relationship exists between lack of economic resources and lower student-athlete graduation rate for HBCUs, the presence of additional impacting factors are also admitted as not all HBCUs are struggling in graduating their athletes. Seeking an additional explanation for graduation rates, this case study examined key components of organizational culture in the form of policy, language and ritual of an HBCU athletic department with an exceptionally high student-athlete graduation rate. Framework for the study is based on historical research connecting performance to organizational culture and understanding how policy, language and ritual transmit culture through socialization. Results indicate that a focus on purposefully designed policy, language and ritual can shape a culture in athletics geared toward academic success.

Introduction

Former NCAA President Myles Brand publically voiced a widespread concern in 2006 that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are disproportionately represented in the bottom of the NCAA Division I graduation rates for student-athletes and academic rankings (Carey, 2006). Four years later, the concern is still valid as the most recent statistics reveal seven of the ten worst institutions in graduating student-athletes are HBCUs (“College Athletes’,” 2009). A review of NCAA Division I member institutions indicates that HBCUs represent less than 7% of the total membership.

Former President Brand and Dennis Thomas, commissioner of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC), an HBCU conference, argued that the lower graduation rates in HBCUs are primarily due to fewer economic resources to provide academic support for their students (Carey, 2006). President Brand voiced this explanation again in 2007 with data concerning the NCAA Academic Progress Rates (APR) (Marot, 2007). The 2007 APR data also disproportionately represented HBCUs in the lower ratings (Marot, 2007). The problem is again attributed to lower financial resources for those institutions.
The NCAA developed a term to encompass many HBCUs and their struggles with the academic success of their athletes—“low resource institutions.” Officially, low resource institutions’ athletics departments spend (academically) in the bottom 10 percent per capita on their athletes and also have high Pell Grant eligibility.” (Moltz, 2010). 2010 APR results indicated more woes for HBCUs as 52% of those competing in Division I received penalties for negative results on the academic index (“Teams Subject,” 2010). Recognizing the ongoing problem, the NCAA has created an advisory group and grant fund to directly address the issues for HBCUs and academics (Hosick, 2010). Money is still largely acknowledged as the cause for the academic for low resource institutions, but the NCAA also publicly recognized during this latest release of APR data that low resource institutions do achieve academic success and that “it is not just money” that impacts academic success (Laney, 2010).

With the NCAA’s acknowledgement that financial resources are not the only factor in reduced academic success for Division I athletes, serious inquiry regarding the alternative factors for succeeding low resource institutions must be pursued. Organizational culture is long recognized as a critical factor in achieving performance and “long-term effectiveness” in organizations (Cameron & Quinn, 1999). This study begins exploration of the possible alternative factors in exemplar academic success from low resource institutions by examining the impact of critical components of organizational culture. Specifically, can effective policy, language and rituals as a tangible core of an organizational culture lead to overcoming the obstacle of “low resources?”

As noted by the NCAA, not all NCAA Division I HBCUs are struggling at achieving the important mission of graduating its student-athletes. South Atlantic University (SAU) is a pseudonym assigned to an HBCU that has averaged over 7% over the average NCAA student-athlete graduation rate for the last five years (2009 NCAA Report, n.d.). They graduate the highest percentage of athletes in their conference despite having an overall budget lower than 50% of the conference schools (Equity in Athletics, n.d.). As an official “low resource institution,” it appears economic resources are not the sole factor pushing SAU student-athletes toward successful performance in their academics. The case of SAU athletics presented an apposite opportunity to explore the idea that variables other than financial resources can impact organizational performance in student-athlete academic achievement. Specifically, this study explored the degree to which policy, language and ritual as cultural content within the SAU athletic program impacted the socialization of student athletes to an organizational culture that promotes academic success.

Organizational Culture’s Impact on Performance

Although the term “organizational culture” is first attributed to Pettigrew in 1979 (Southall, 2001), it exploded in the popular business vernacular two years later as four influential and bestselling books claimed the concept was critical to overcome America’s business and economic woes (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). These initial works utilized intensive case study examinations to derive a theory of how culture could contribute to the success of America’s most financially productive companies (Ouchi, 1981; Pascale & Athos, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Eventually research and theory regarding how organizational culture affects performance evolved from an examination of for-profit businesses to other organizational types, such as higher education and athletics. The result is a body of work that
reflects an intense academic and popular fascination with a hard to define construct labeled as critical for economic and organizational success.

Linking organizational culture to sport organizations has not been a popular topic for researchers (Schroeder & Scribner, 2006). Qualitative research regarding athletics has generally covered culture as a sub-topic, but has not been linked to a specific culture theory. In a longitudinal study of a collegiate men’s basketball team, Adler and Adler (1985) employed the idea of an athletic culture that included social isolation related to negative academic attitudes and outcomes. They referred to a peer subculture characterized by anti-intellectual and anti-academic attitudes (Adler & Adler, 1985, p. 246). Bowen and Levin (2003) contemplated the same theme through anecdotal evidence of an athletic culture that leads to isolation and negative attitudes toward academics. Implicit in both works was the idea that subcultures of intercollegiate student-athletes contain behaviors and values that impact academic performance. Qualitative research has found the opposite culture in female student-athletes as their values embraced an academic orientation (Riemer, Beal & Schroeder, 2000).

Schroeder and Scribner (2006) utilized Edgar Schein’s organizational framework of artifacts, espoused values and underlying assumptions to understand the culture of an athletic department at a small Christian college. Their focus was to understand the relationship of the subculture of athletics to overall institutional culture especially within the context of the religious values. They found that the religious culture adopted by athletics influenced personnel selection and decision making. Hence, the presence of a strong, positive culture produced success in the performance of the department.

Perhaps the validity of the notion that a unique culture exists within athletic organizations can be seen in a presentation title from a recent prestigious Intercollegiate Athletics Forum in New York City sponsored by Street and Smith’s Sport Business Journal. A panel, “Athletic Department Culture and the Influence on Student-Athlete Behavior”, consisted of the NCAA Vice President of Education Services and the athletic directors from the Universities of Maryland and Missouri (Fifth Annual Intercollegiate Athletics Forum, n.d.). Despite the popular recognition of culture and its impact in athletics, research has been scarce and inconsistent in methodology and direction. It mirrors the study of organizational culture in general. Difficulty in defining and measuring the construct and its impacts presents obstacles in establishing depth and direction in research, although culture is clearly recognized as a significant variable in the operation of a sport organization.

Socialization

Research and theory in socialization suffers similar limiting characteristics as organizational culture interests. A myriad of definitions reflect numerous directions in theory and study, leading to potential confusion in understanding the construct (Chao et al., 1994, Tierney, 1997; Shannon, 2007). The construct has been described as simply as “what do we need to know to survive/excel in the organization” (Tierney, 1988, p. 8). Socialization is also recognized for its complexity as a construct, as is reflected in this often used definition from Dunn, Rouse & Seff (1994) “process by which individuals acquire the attitudes, beliefs, values and skills needed to participate effectively in organized social life” (p. 375). Agreement centers on socialization as a process that encapsulates the transmission of culture to organizational members with the outcome being adjustment into the organizational setting (Louis, 1990).
Undergraduates and Socialization

Socialization has provided the framework for research in development of individuals in many different settings including education (Wilcoxson, 2007). Chickering and Reisser (1993) cited models from Pascarella (1985) and Weidman (1989) as beginning points for understanding the socialization of the undergraduate student and variables that impact their cognitive and affective development. Pascarella emphasized that a group of five influences acts to determine socialization outcomes for students. Student background traits such as personality and ethnicity combined with the structure of the institution (e.g., size and selectivity) result in the institutional environment. The institutional environment directly impacts relationships with socializing agents such as faculty and peers. Together with the quality of student effort, the set of influencing variables leads to individual cognitive outcomes. Wiedman’s model presents additional complexity. Highlighted are additional external influences from parents and non-college reference groups like employers. Both academic and social influences were recognized as well with important outcomes reflecting important affective life development and cultural issues such as values and attitudes. The comprehensiveness of the Wiedman model represents the variety of impacts that a student-athlete faces in encountering the organizational culture at an institution and served as a base of the conceptual framework for this study.

Academics and African-American Athletes

The recent graduation rates from the NCAA do disprove some myths. Overall student-athletes graduate at a higher rate than the student body. However, a closer examination of those statistics reveals extensive academic gaps for African-Americans, especially males as well as male students in basketball and football (New Study Reveals, 2009). Extensive quantitative, cognitive and socio-cultural research also reveals a clear connection between negative academic outcomes and intercollegiate athletic participation. The obstacles for college student-athletes and academic success continue to be present and require continued research and intervention.

The social and academic experience of the African-American college student-athlete has drawn some research attention, but similar research on the HBCU athletic experience has been neglected. Only one dissertation examines the value HBCU athletic directors, football coaches and student-athletes place on education (Taylor, 2005). Taylor (2005) found that HBCU athletic departments suffer from a lack of academic support infrastructure in staff and facilities, and students do perceive that some coaches and faculty do not care about their academic success. The complete lack of research in this area is surprising given the obvious negative results for HBCUs in the NCAA academic statistics. The disproportionate representation of HBCUs in the bottom of those statistics is increasingly visible in the media, and the NCAA recognizes the problem and is addressing it.

The literature provides firm support for the use of organizational culture and socialization as a base to understand the performance of an organization. In this study, the intent was to understand the exceptional performance of an HBCU athletic department in graduating its student-athletes. Organizational culture and understanding how the culture is communicated and transmitted presented an opportunity to understand in a specific context what has been recognized by the NCAA and national media as a pressing concern. Complete lack of research on the problems contributed to the necessity for this study.
Policy, Language and Ritual

Policy, language, and ritual represent cultural content areas of socialization that reflect organizational culture learned and serve to transmit the culture. Chao et al. (1994) advised that identifying content or dimensions of socialization is critical to the examination of relationships to outcomes. These culture dimensions include language and history. Socialization in the language dimension means learning the jargon, the language unique to the organization. For Schein (2004), a common language represents a critical base factor in achieving any successfully performing organizational culture. For this study, I explored what language the socializing agents (coaches, administrators, peers) used to communicate and transmit messages concerning academic values, beliefs, and attitudes. This communication can occur in a variety of forms including verbal, non-verbal and written.

Chao et al. define the history dimension of the socialization process as encompassing the traditions and rituals that transmit cultural knowledge. Thoughtfully created rituals result in organizational cohesiveness and consistently provide the strongest influence in conveying organizational culture (Deal & Kennedy, 2000). Rituals on campus delineate expectations for student behavior and serve to shape overall student experiences while effectively transmitting the culture of the institution (Magolda, 2000). Schein (2004) extended Chao et al.’s content dimensions of language and history to also include all observable products of the organization as the artifacts that embody the organizational culture. Thus, in addition to language and rituals, policies, which are cultural artifacts, are essential key tools in the process of socialization. Policies in the form of “systems and procedures” are the chief “reinforcement mechanisms” in an organization’s arsenal for transmitting culture (Schein, p. 265). Organizational policy in context for this study represents both formal and informal rules initiated by various stakeholders in the SAU athletic department to shape academic efforts and behavior of the student-athletes.

An important context for socialization strategies for organizations concerns whether cultural transmission is informal or formal (Jones, 1986). Weidman (1989) agreed that the normative pressures that undergraduates faced in both the social and academic environments can be overtly formal or can be hidden and informal. Written academic standards represent an example of formal socialization content while “unwritten rules defining faculty expectations for students’ academic performance” demonstrate an informal tactic (Weidman, 1989, p.307). Thus, part of the challenge in this study was to observe and uncover the student-athletes’ socialization experience for both informal and formal content as it applied to language, ritual and tradition and policy.

Methods

Given the complex nature of organizational culture, socialization, and the necessity of understanding the perspectives of the various stakeholders within the athletic department in that setting, qualitative research in general and the case study method in particular was the most appropriate research strategy. The case in this study was South Atlantic University Athletics. This organization was chosen in order to understand the phenomenon of their excellent graduation rate for student-athletes and relationships to organizational culture and its transmission.
Data Collection

Interview participants effectively represented the three socializing groups naturally occurring in an intercollegiate athletics organization. Administrators were invited to participate based on their leadership position inside the athletic department as well as in the university as a whole. Leadership is significantly intertwined with both the formation and transmitting of organizational culture (Schein, 2004). Key administrators interviewed included: University President, Athletic Director, Associate and Assistant Athletic Directors, and the Academic Support Director. Ms. Bennett, Athletic Director, expressed that the University President is an integral part of athletics at SAU. Coaches represented potential leadership within subcultures of individual sports at SAU in addition to being in the position of a socializing influence for student-athletes.

Student-athletes represented both the peer group as socializing agent and the individuals experiencing the socialization process and organizational culture of the department. They also are characterized by a number of differing variables that have been shown to have unique relationships with academics in an intercollegiate athletic department. Studies and NCAA statistics show that age, gender, and sport specifically can correlate diversely with graduation rates and academic data (Pascarella et al., 1995; Riemer et al., 2000; Lucas & Lovaglia, 2002). Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure that perspectives by gender, sport and year in school are represented (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). Eighteen student-athlete interview participants were selected to represent two from each sport program. A semi-structured interview approach was employed to ensure that standard data was obtained across the interviews, while permitting other themes to emerge from individuals (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

Additional data gathering occurred through observations of staff and team meetings, Academic Support Center activities and programs, team practices, and Student Advisory Athletic Committee meetings (SAAC). Specifically observations were geared to gathering data related to cultural content and socialization process components within the organization. Language and ritual/traditions are visible artifacts of organizational culture (Schein, 2004) as well as core components in socialization (Chao et al., 1994). Observation of these components of socialization at SAU provided insight into how, when and where socializing agents visibly transmitted values, beliefs and attitudes regarding academics and graduation.

Artifact collection was conducted as an additional method to triangulate the data and provided emerging directions to explore in observation and interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Criteria for selection of athletic department materials for analysis included relevance to and evidence of attitudes, beliefs and values of the organizational culture and academic performance and mission. Examples included: Student-athlete Handbook, team manuals, mission statements, academic advising materials, and recruiting materials.

Data Analysis

Utilizing inductive analysis for this study allowed the discovery of emerging “patterns, themes, and categories” through “interactions with the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). The analysis of the data used a categorical strategy (Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). After each interview, audiotapes were transcribed and then data coded into categories, that is, words, ideas, and phrases from within the interviews that appeared to be significant evidence of the organizational culture components, and to socialization and its potential relationship to academic
success. Field notes from observations and artifacts underwent the same inductive and
categorical analysis.

**Policy, Language and Ritual at SAU**

Academic policy at SAU emanates from two areas. Official department academic policy
is largely initiated and implemented from the academic services center. Mostly formal in nature,
the policies are written, reinforced throughout the department and effective in reaching freshman
and transfer students as they begin their membership in the culture. Second, coaches maintain
their own set of academic policies, a mixture of formal and informal rules geared toward their
own assurance of their athlete’s academic success. Commitment to implementing the policies
from coaches and academic center staff results in transmitting the academic culture through
numerous socialization opportunities.

Participants did not unilaterally recognize or admit the existence of a common academic
language throughout the organization aside from two Presidential formal themes aimed at the
institution as a whole. Further exploration of discussions about academic missions,
relationships, and roles and responsibilities reveal that student-athletes have indeed adopted the
informal language of their coaches and the administrators, which mirrors the ultimate academic
values of the organization. Informal language during everyday interactions also drives the
feeling for student-athletes that the athletic department is a caring and familial organization.

The organization directs resources to reward academic success through two formal
rituals. Purposefully designed by the administrators, the ceremonies engage the entire
organization and serve to inspire those not receiving the tangible awards and verbal praise to
work for those awards in the future. The administrators know that the rituals are a prime
method of concretely recognizing the importance of academics. And the student-athletes have
taken notice.

Reviewing these three areas of cultural content demonstrate how organizational values
are reflected in the academic operation. Effectiveness stems not from merely well-designed
policy, language and ritual, but from people who care about the outcomes of the cultural
instruments. By its very nature, informal content provides even more definitive evidence of an
academic culture and raises the level of effectiveness of the socialization of the student-athletes.

**Policies**

**Academic Services Center**

Asked to choose the most effective academic policy at SAU athletics usually evokes one
of two responses from administrators, coaches and students: study hall or weekly freshman
meetings. Both are implemented in the physical location of academic services and are designed
and coordinated by Dr. Rollins, the academic services coordinator. The success of the policies
emanates from the commitment of the academic services staff to develop personal relationships
with the student-athletes. In addition, thoughtful enforcement of rules and guidelines by
academic services staff and then supported by coaches and administrators communicates to the
athletes that academics and these policies are taken very seriously.
Study Hall

Study hall appears to be successful for essentially three reasons; it enforces study time, provides access to academic resources including staff, and motivates athletes to study so as to be exempted from the study hall requirement. Understanding these outcomes as viewed by the participants compels a closer look at the elements that make SAU study hall work.

The program operates as a combination of efficient physical design, rules-enforcement, and staff support. All are essentially a creation of Dr. Rollins, who brought the format from her previous institution. She credits a “friendly” yet “structured” environment as keys to engaging the student-athletes. The Academic Services Center consists of two rooms. Furthest from the entrance is the office of Dr. Rollins, whose open door policy encourages student-athletes to frequent for advisement and conversation, but also allows her to supervise study hall activities and to visit with students for the purpose of monitoring ongoing individual academic efforts and doling out support and praise. Study hall operates in the second space, a large cinderblock room geared toward promoting staff interaction in conjunction with the ability to monitor student-athlete activity.

Perhaps most important is the placement of two staff persons within the study hall room. Every student must enter by the graduate assistant’s (GA) desk, and sign in and out, indicating the time spent in study hall. The assistant director for academic services is positioned across the room from the GA. From both vantage points they can observe each computer screen; ensuring students are absorbed in academic activities as opposed to the temptation of entertainment. For example, the GA catches a student playing a video game and quickly reprimands him. Jokingly referring to him as “lazy,” he is forced to sit by her side and return his attention to academics: the GA tests his knowledge for an upcoming quiz. The design is purposeful according to Dr. Rollins. The physical layout combined with the rules and their enforcement by the staff clearly indicates that academics are taken very seriously.

The rules for study hall are critical in creating an atmosphere of seriousness regarding academics as well as providing multiple opportunities to socialize new students to their academic vision. Entering freshmen and transfer students must attend four hours per week for at least one hour a session. Students carrying below a 2.4 GPA or enrolled in a “developmental” course are labeled as “at-risk” and are required to attend the four hours per week as well. These regulations are spelled out in the official student-athlete handbook.

Not in the handbook, but cited in the academic services manual are the rules governing behavior, attendance, and the ultimate consequences for failure to abide by the them. Only academic efforts are expected on the computers; to prevent temptation, social networking websites (e.g., facebook and myspace) are blocked. No cell phones, IPODs or mp3 players are permitted and no loud or social conversing may take place. Behavioral infractions receive reprimands from staff, but more importantly not making the required four hours is taken very seriously by Dr. Rollins:

And if it's someone who is a no-show the first time, it's in the report. Second time, it's in the report. Third time, it's a no show – I kick them out. They are no longer welcome to my center.

The “report” is a weekly Friday memo e-mailed to administrators and coaches detailing academic service activities and study hall attendance infractions. Thomas, a freshman student-
athlete, ended up in the Friday memo when he failed to attend his four hours one week. His coach required him to run arena stairs the following week at 6:30 a.m. as punishment. Never missing another study hall session will be the outcome of the punishment according to Thomas. Perhaps Sanaa, a junior transfer athlete, sums up the student-athlete experience with the study hall rules best:

I don’t want to say it’s punishment to go down there, because it is not. You can converse a little bit. It is not a prison, but it is not just free time. It is not a social lounge. It is kind of in the middle.

The academic support staff conveys gravitas blended with compassion while working with study hall participants. Students are greeted as they enter and sign in. Hugs are doled out liberally by all three staff members to students in study hall, accompanied by praise for any academic accomplishment. Many students are labeled as “sweetie” by Dr. Rollins. The assistant director moves from student to student in the room checking on assignments being worked on and taking time to test a student-athlete with flash cards for an upcoming exam. Two students visit the GA at her desk for assistance on assignments, but largely her role appears to be one of enforcing the rules and study atmosphere.

The combination of study hall elements leads to an observed effectiveness for three reasons. First, “you have no choice to study,” that according to Allison, a senior. A 14 week semester means that required students will spend 52 hours in study hall. Attentive staff, encouraging academic focus and implementing rules that limit “goofing off” as Michael brands it, provide the impetus for mandatory studying. Michael had transferred to SAU the previous year. Second, students view study hall as a provider of academic support and resources. The best evidence is the customary attendance of student-athletes who are not required to be there. Exempted from study hall since their first semester at SAU, Allison and Tyler are seniors who come to utilize the computers and meet with staff regarding assignments. Tyler cites the main reasons now for appearing in study hall are to “check in with Dr. Rollins” and assist other student-athletes because “we have a great support system down there.” Allison is a regular and largely because of the “nurturing environment” as provided by the academic staff. Finally, as Sanaa alluded, study hall can be seen as a form of punishment and something to evade. For one athlete, the reward for meeting the standard and avoiding study hall is four precious hours of time- “and that is extra motivation to go to class…. You want to have those four hours to sleep, relax, whatever. We value out time.”

Michael provides an example of a study hall from his previous institution that was not effective. Essentially a computer lab, it was monitored by another undergraduate student. Athletes attended for thirty minutes while signing in for three hours and spent the majority of their study hall time playing video games. At SAU, “they just don’t put up with that.” Dr. Rollins’ study hall reflects the academic values of the organization on a number of levels and socializes the student-athletes to the academic culture. The value of academics is visible in the way staff approach their work. Constant interaction, maintaining a serious tenor, and providing persistent encouragement serve notice that expectations are high for the program, academics and the outcome of graduation. Requirements force extensive interaction time for the newest members of the organization and those at risk of not accepting and succeeding in an academic culture. Coaches are engaged with the Friday memo for their additional support and to provide consequences for non-compliance. Mary, a junior transfer, admits her struggles with academics.
and proclaims the usefulness of the mandatory study hall. “That is something that we have above regular students here, because that is how we get our academics straight.”

**Weekly Freshman Meetings**

Targeting freshmen and new transfer students is the official academic services policy and practice of “weekly freshman meetings.” Athletes required to follow this policy must meet with the assistant director in academic services or the GA on Monday or Tuesday. Students bring their academic folders to the 10 to 15 minute meeting. Folders contain their master planning sheet that lists each course and its upcoming assignments, and current grades. Graded work is included in the folder as well. The SAU student-athlete handbook indicates that the purpose of the “required” semester long meetings is to assist with “transition to college, time management skills, majors, and explain the University system and NCAA rules.” For similar reasons, Ms. Bennett and Dr. Rollins believe this policy to be the most effective program within the department. “Good starts are critical.” A component of the “good start” is receiving individual attention where important personal relationships develop versus the less personal study hall group monitoring from academic services staff. Resulting opportunities from the meetings include academic and athletic intervention ultimately involving coaches. The interventions are enhanced through getting to know individual learning styles through the personal interaction. The personal interaction leads to specialized academic interventions according to Dr. Rollins.

The student-athletes cite two reasons for the meeting successfully impacting their academic efforts as a freshman: the meeting keeps them on track, helps with time management and provides interventions if needed. James mirrors the policy objectives regarding “transition” as stated in the student-athlete handbook from his perspective:

> I mean, you come out of high school with a high school mindset. You are coming to college to party and have fun. At these meetings, you are introduced to a new scenario. Academics is the number one scenario in college. 'Cause you're really getting into the real world in college. The meetings are really introducing you to academics, being on the right track so you can have a great future.

Keeping James and other student-athletes on the “right track” comes from the academic support staff monitoring grades, teaching time management and intervening when necessary. Mary is grateful for the academic staff to be aware of her academic, athletic and personal situation. She is confident in their support and knows they will “have our back if something goes wrong.” Assigning a tutor is a common intervention and Dr. Rollins and her staff maintain a “hit list” for the tutors in academic services. Student-athletes who are discovered to be having academic issues within the freshmen meetings are placed on this posted list that tutors review. When tutors arrive for their scheduled time period, they make sure they see student-athletes placed on the “hit-list.”

This policy is again Dr. Rollins’ initiative. Employing it at her previous institution, she notes that it increases student-athlete participation and accountability by setting “the rules upfront and letting them know what it is going to be like and this is what we are expecting.” Like study hall, consequences hold students responsible: “the minute they break those rules, we will deal with them accordingly.” The Friday memo awaits those who do not show for the
freshman meeting.

Culturally, freshman meetings work in many of the same ways as study hall. It brings new members of the organization into the central physical location for academic culture in the organization where they can continue to receive that positive academic and graduation message. Thomas meets with the GA each week, where she “reinforces the idea that you need to go to class.” The academic messages come from caring staff, who interact individually with the student-athlete each week during the entire semester. The message is reinforced on the meeting document itself, which states the central goal “to become a student-athlete graduate of SAU.” The follow through on academic issues discovered in the meetings as well as consequences for not attending illustrate the depth of the value of academics in the organization.

**Attendance Policy**

An extensive vetting process resulted in the newest edition to formal academic policy in the organization. The organization claims “zero tolerance” for unexcused classroom absences according to the student-athlete handbook. “Official contests” are the only valid reasons for absence. This policy includes consequences for one, two and then three missed classes for the same course. The severity of the penalties appears to be the link to its effectiveness. According to Ms. Bennett, the policy was shaped by the University-wide athletic committee in addition to feedback from the coaches. Consensus in development was key in the development and success of this policy; its ultimate cost is the loss of scholarship funding.

Just implemented the last year, penalties are progressive over three unexcused absences. The first absence penalty constitutes a meeting with Dr. Rollins and their Head Coach to “address the importance of attending class and potential punishment.” Suspension of athletic participation from practice and a game occurs upon the next offense and the athletic director is now brought into the loop. A third occasion will combine the second penalty with a 10% loss of scholarship. In addition, “an academic success plan” will be created by the student-athlete, coach, and “faculty mentor.”

Because athletic competition might be impacted, Ms. Morris (compliance director) explains that the policy’s effectiveness can arise from a peer and coach pressure perspective. “Coaches are on them and their peers are on them” as “that can affect a win or a loss.” “We take away money” is what most impresses Coach Davis, who coaches a women’s Olympic sport program. A large Atlantic Coast Conference institution is the only other school that she knows will enact that severe a punishment. Class attendance was not a priority at her previous school. Here, this policy serves as symbol that “we don’t really play with academics.”

The attendance policy continues to communicate the message that academics is taken very seriously by the organization. The news of one loss of a scholarship spread by peer network throughout the entire organization, according to Allison. Student-athletes have learned that the attendance policy does not contain empty threats and believe they will be caught if they miss class. The policy itself carries significant weight as formal cultural content. However enforcement seems informal and coach dependent. Coach Ross and Coach Ward indicate that they have inflicted punishments of suspension and scholarship loss according to their own judgment and valuation of the offense versus departmental policy guidelines. In this instance, enacted team policy has combined with stated organizational policy to influence student-athletes that the entire organization is watching. The athletes understand that being in every class is a
habit viewed critical by the organization and is ultimately related to academic success and graduation.

**Academic Advising**

The three above policies are generally seen as most effective in the organization and they also represent the most formally presented. Dr. Rollins has also designed an academic advising system retaining both formal and informal qualities that significantly enhance the academic culture in which the SAU athletes are engaged. Academic advising runs completely through Dr. Rollins and she incorporates decision making into the advisement regarding: course enrollment, major choice and dropping a course. Dr. Rollins’ system provides for continued development of caring relationships with staff, increased quantity of contact with student-athletes resulting in quality opportunities for socializing students to academics and graduation, and overall monitoring of each student’s matriculation.

Institutional policy provides for academic disciplines to assign academic advisers to each student who are expected to counsel students on their major curriculum sequence throughout the matriculation. Athletic policy dictates that each student must see Dr. Rollins before their major advisor when pre-registering for courses. Also required is permission from Dr. Rollins to drop a course, even though this can be done electronically directly by the student. These regulations explain the long line of students waiting in the hallway, two days before the commencement of the fall semester.

Advising provides another point of contact in addition to study hall and freshman meetings and is a critical method of staying in contact with upperclassmen who no longer have to participate in study hall and freshman meetings. Despite the long lines of students, advising is not all business and appears to be another chance to develop the caring relationships that signify the organization’s culture and atmosphere. Each student is asked initially not about their course of study, but about summer experiences and their personal lives. Some student-athletes seem genuinely surprised by the inquiry and take a second to collect their thoughts, having been totally focused on the business of trying to register for classes. The outcome for students is a feeling of support and inclusion.

Dr. Rollins’ advising strategy for matriculation has a relatively new component that has become part of the academic culture and vernacular: three and a half years. Student-athletes are forcefully encouraged to graduate in three and a half years versus four. For her, this is an element of advising that she “is most proud of now.” It is highlighted in orientation, where she explains how it can be accomplished. The fruits of this strategy are beginning to ripen, as one athlete finished last year in the time frame and two will finish this semester. By pushing the expectation of graduating a semester early, she hopes they will graduate on time in four years. Academic advising is Dr. Rollins’ designed domain. She ensures through regulation, monitoring, and personal relationships that student-athletes are compassionately coerced towards graduation.

**Summary – Academic Services**

All of the academic services’ formal and informal policies denote an organizational culture reflecting values and beliefs in the significance and seriousness of academics. Driven by caring and conscientious staff, student-athletes learn in academic services that the organization
cares deeply about their academic success and graduation and that serious consequences follow non-compliance. The academic services center physically performs as a distribution center for the organizational message and vision regarding academics and graduation. However, Dr. Rollins recognizes that her unit alone cannot succeed at socializing students to academics. From her perspective, coaches are a bigger influence because of the amount of direct contact and influence they employ. The coaches have to “buy in.” SAU coaches reflect the academic values of the organization and utilize a number of their own policies to reinforce their own beliefs and support the academic mission.

**Coach Policies**

Every coach implements at least one of their own academic policies in addition to those emanating from academic services. They do not supersede Dr. Rollins’ initiatives, but generally serve to reinforce the academic mission of the organization as well as keep their athletes’ eligible and on the field. Coach policies derive from previous coaching experiences or have been learned from coaching mentors. They are implemented for a variety of reasons. Upholding academic tradition, competing academically, ensuring future careers off the field, and guaranteeing athletic eligibility are the chief motives for adding an additional layer of academic cultural content. Those programs with more resources, mainly in the form of assistant coaches, implement more policies. Those programs are also faced with the most pressure to keep their players on the field. Also programs intent on having the highest GPA in the organization employ a wider range of academic strategies.

**Study Hall**

Coaches utilize their own versions of enforced study hall to get their entire team engaged both on and off campus. Sunday nights in the library from 6-8pm is the appointed study hall for Coach Haskins’ team. While she knows “they don’t do a lot of studying,” that is not necessarily the goal. “Transitioning back to Monday” and returning the focus to academics serve as the true purpose. Sunday nights are study hall for Coach Ward as well. He hopes to get his players in the study mind frame for the week, but also wants to make sure they are on campus and not out of town and heading to classes on Monday morning. Sunday night study halls are more about the timing than anything else for these coaches. Their athletes are expected to change the weekend perspective to a weekday focus on classes and studying.

Study hall as punishment and intervention are academic instruments for Coach Ward and Coach Sumter. “Study hall boot camp” was designed by Coach Ward and Dr. Rollins, in response to his athletes “getting behind” academically. For one month during the off-season, individual workouts were ceased and players and coaches reported to academic services every day for two hours a day. The program caused a “rebellion” as the players felt “they were being treated like kids.” Coach Ward’s response was “well, you are acting like kids.” The outcome was better grades, and Coach Ward recognized the effort as a “little method of punishment.”

A grade of D or F at midterm results in mandatory one hour per week study hall in the coaching offices of Coach Sumter’s program. Punishment versus study time is clearly her goal. She observes that teammates will “laugh” at those who end up in the study hall and will work harder to avoid it. Sanaa, a victim of the study hall, bolsters that sentiment:
Because that is the worst. [The coaches] will sit there and literally stop doing what they are doing and watch you for an hour. I might have nothing to do, but I am just going to act like I am doing something. If they leave the room, I will stop and then when they come back I will start to fake writing again.

Sanaa and Monica relay that this study hall is also a punishment for not going to class, and for them, it “is our motivation to make sure we are in class.”

In the tradition of her mentor, the athletic director-Ms. Bennett, Coach Sumter holds study hall when the team travels. The bus and the hotel are locations for off-campus study halls, up to an hour and a half in duration. Coach Mabel ensures “mandatory study time…on the road as well.” “A quiet hour” is spent on the bus, so they can focus on whatever they need to focus on.” From Brooke’s description, Coach Mabel has understated her study hall efforts on the bus. “An extremist” is how Brooke refers to a policy of taking all cell phones away during most trips. “She literally takes them away.”

Coach initiated study halls are employed with differing goals and structure. Despite Ms. Bennett’s misgivings, these study halls have impacted the student-athletes in positive ways concerning academic values and subsequent behavior. Increased studying is not always the outcome, but the athletes recognize that academics are taken seriously on the organizational and team level. Ms. Bennett believes that for study hall to work, someone has to show a genuine interest and truly engage in the activity. This engagement appears to be the case for these coaches.

**Competitive Considerations**

The study hall policies are described by coaches as formal structures with rules and guidelines. At times, SAU coaches evaluate individual athlete needs and make informal adjustments to accommodate conflicts between academic and athletic requirements. Coach Overby explains that as a smaller sport, his athletes “don’t always get the preferred [class times].” Although conflicts between practice and class time do occur, Coach Overby emphasizes to his athletes that class is the priority and “get out to practice as soon as you can.” This policy applies to individual problems with courses as well:

I had couple of players struggling last semester, and they had term papers due and I told them to take a couple days off and get it taken care of. Make sure that you get your paper done. I said, you should have taken care of this paper earlier, but get it taken care of. Grades are more important than you playing…. I think they trusted and respected me enough to know that he is going to let me do what I need to do academically.

“Walking the walk” is how Coach Mabel refers to adjusting competitive athletic efforts to advance academics. Practice is eliminated around mid-term and final exams to “give them the opportunity to be successful.” “Road” and “overnight” games during the week are avoided to limit missed classes. Games played during the week are scheduled for Wednesdays since “it is more difficult to miss a Tuesday/ Thursday class because they only meet twice a week.” “If they are in class, they will have an opportunity to learn.” Athletes struggling academically will be left on campus instead of traveling. “It is a privilege to travel with this team…first things first is academics.”
The no practice policy around exams also taught Allison and her teammates that Coach Mabel’s priorities lie in academics.

We were freaking out. We felt like we needed to practice. She said, "You're not going to forget how to play softball in three days." But you do need to study for midterms, that's like, she knows when midterms and finals are and she knows to lay low on the conditioning and the practice.

Coach Mabel and Overby do not face the pressure to win like the major programs do. Ms. Bennett does not necessarily expect them to win. Their academic values and beliefs combine with that freedom and produce flexible, informal policies that send a direct and visible signal to the student-athletes. Coach Mabel’s simple plan of not practicing during exams challenged player’s notions of athletics versus academics visibly and demonstrated their coach’s commitment to their academic success. These informal policies send an even stronger message to the athletes than the formal policies. Not based on consequences, the policies are geared to create the trust and respect that Coach Overby highlighted regarding ensuring his players focus on academics.

**Policy Summary**

The academic policies for the organization are thorough and comprehensive at the organizational level and in varying degrees at the team level. For socialization purposes, they exist as artifacts of the SAU academic culture and serve as the impetus for other cultural content and socialization processes. They require interactions between staff and student-athletes, leading to the development of relationships and opportunity to deliver the academic message. The content of the message through these policies is multi-layered. Student-athletes are exposed to a variety of values surrounding academics: it takes time and commitment, it is to be respected and taken seriously, their athletic life is at risk for lack of academic effort and success, the organization cares about them and their success. Student-athlete sentiments regarding the mission of the organization focus on dual directions of winning on the field and being academically successful. Sanaa succinctly cited the shared view of the department’s mission as “win’s and A’s.” The student-athlete outlook regarding the organizational mission indicate that academic center and coach policies have played a significant role in socializing the athletes to the culture.

**Language**

When asked whether common words or phrases are used in the organization regarding academics, many participants responded in the negative or did not provide strong responses. However, observations and analysis of overall conversations reveal common language around two central values. Formal and informal language centers on the belief that student-athletes should be good citizens off the field and need to “act accordingly” as Sanaa refers to it. Informal and non-verbal language convey the attitude that SAU athletics is caring and as a result, family type organization. Tying the phrases together as a language component demonstrates how it conveys the compassionate part of the culture to the student-athletes. Academic language is
present and emanates from Ms. Bennett, Dr. Rollins and the coaches, but generally represents a component of the message to be a good citizen.

**Good Citizens**

President Samuels’ theme of *Think, Work, Serve* is the institution’s motto. It is pervasively visible across campus according to Coach Ward, “billboards, just little flyers and any (official SAU) letters” contain the phrase. He made sure his program manual contained the theme after the President introduced it. Dr. Rollins has it painted on the Academic Services Center wall in large letters. Verbally, President Samuels does express his theme on a consistent basis. James states that “every speech” from President Samuels contains *Think, Work, Serve*. As players in Coach Ross’s program, they are addressed by President Samuels virtually after every game. President Samuels has been successful in enveloping the campus in his message, but key is its internalization and interpretation.

Administrators, coaches, and students who cite the motto as the mission of their department connect it to the idea of students being good citizens. Ms. Morris sees it as direction for her role and the role of the organization, which is “make sure they (student-athletes) go out and be productive citizens.” Coach Mabel cites the phrase as the athletic mission as well. Her interpretation centers on an “academic focus” and links it to the recruiting of student-athletes who are “going to be contributors to society.” President Samuels is observed by Coach Mabel to embody the motto in his actions of visible support for her program and the academic mission. James and Tyler are exposed to the motto more than any other student-athletes because of the quantity of contact with the President. They were the only student-athletes to refer to *Think, Work, Serve* as the organizational mission. The message as James and Tyler perceive it refers to their responsibility as campus leaders and the need to be positive role models who set an example for the entire student body. *Think, Work, Serve* as conveyed to them exerts a sense of expectation and subsequent pressure to be good citizens. President Samuels’ motto has reached SAU athletics and had intended impacts of creating a sense of academic effort and contribution to society. Its reach however is limited and has been internalized by only a few members of the organization.

Informally, language about student-athletes being good citizens is pervasive and starts at the top of the organization according to Coach Overby. For Ms. Bennett, the theme is the same, but contains an additional intent. Her concern is for the organization as a whole and its image in the larger community. Recognizing that the organization is a commodity and needs a positive brand in the community to acquire precious financial resources, her concern is “perception.” According to Coach Overby:

Perception is the one thing that Coach Bennett uses a lot in our staff meetings. The perception that the community has about us and the University. We have to make sure that the perception is a certain way, because for many years it was pretty poor. Perception for the University. And that is the one thing that they are really striving to change … She is always very conscious about telling us to be careful about the perception. She doesn't want the coaches going places and doing things where we might be seen as a little odd or weird. Obviously the (Coach Ross’s) players, there are a couple of places downtown where they are just not allowed to go. The coaches will not let them go to those establishments.
Coach Overby credits Ms. Bennett as a “huge influence” in developing a positive “perception” in the community for the organization.

A number of coaches have extended the theme of public perception and utilize different terminology to apply the values to their programs and student-athletes. Exemplary physical appearance and behavior are especially prized outside of athletic competition. “Classy” is how Coach Overby has applied the theme to his own program:

The thing that I hope (the student-athletes) will remember is class. I want them to dress classy when we go to tournaments. I want them to dress classy when they are on campus…Act classy in class. Act classy on the road. Act a certain way when they go to practice. Act a certain way when we go to tournaments… We might not be the best team in the country, but we are at least going to act like we are.

Coach Holt connects part of his success in graduating athletes to “caring” and a component of that is being “big on image.” “Image” for him implies physical appearance, for example “rules about hats in buildings.” It especially suggests appropriate behavior he described as “how you carry yourself.”

Student-athletes utilize similar terms attributed to their coaches in describing an expectation that they physically fulfill roles as good citizens. Mary states that “carrying ourselves right” is her perception of the University mission. She feels pressure to be a role model as a student-athlete. Her coach and administrators assisted her in incorporating that value into her life, as a direct result of personal actions she refers to as “messing up.” Monica has adopted the phrase “carry yourselves accordingly” instead of “carry yourselves right.” This phrase she learned from Coach Sumter and her staff. Counteracting negative perceptions of HBCUs is the context for her use of the phrase. While the references to “image” and “carrying yourself” typically do not directly cite academic behaviors and goals. Positive academic outcomes are strongly implied in the language that creates expectation of being positive role models and good citizens.

Often more straightforwardly related to the academic success component of being a good citizen are references made to “off the field.” This phrase sprinkled throughout discussions with representatives from each level of the organization centered on life outside athletic competition as a student, citizen and future graduate. President Samuels utilizes the term in his locker room speeches:

I mention academics, every chance I get. That they have to be successful, off the field if they plan to be successful on the field. Because if they don't, they won't be eligible to play first. Secondly, another game of life is that you have to make sure that you don't get yourself in trouble, not just for you but also for your team.

Expectations of being a good citizen and academic role model are again exacted upon the student-athletes. Success “outside of touchdowns and points” is what is “preached day in and day out” according to Ms. Gannon.

Coach Ross utilizes the language more than any other coach or administrator and subsequently his athletes use the term “off the field” more than their peers. His view of the organizational mission centers on “off the field” success. Teaching them “what it takes to be
successful in life off the field” sums up his coaching philosophy. “Life off the field” encompasses skills necessary to succeed personally and professionally. Both James and Tyler stress “taking care of business off the field.” “Off the field” symbolizes an expectation of personal and academic accountability for the student-athletes at SAU. They feel the pressure as the message is transmitted top to bottom in the organization.

“With freedom comes responsibility” is a phrase not mentioned by Coach Mabel during an extensive interview. However, Brooke, Allison, and Phyllis immediately thought of it when asked about common phrases used in the organization and they attribute it to Coach Mabel. It represents a more formal example of utilizing good citizen language at the team level. Allison explained that use of the phrase is a recent trend and truly signified a change in coaching philosophy and management of the team. Her freshman year, the team operated from a “handbook of rules [contained in a] big, thick binder.” The handbook was meticulous and detailed in its description of what could or could not be done as a member of the team and supplied the consequences as well. “That handbook was ridiculous.” Conflict arose as “loopholes” were found in the stated rules and athletes attempted to skirt appropriate behavior based on the fact that it was not specifically outlined in the handbook. The next year, the handbook was eliminated and the “with freedom comes responsibility” system implemented. Allison felt empowered and accountable with the new philosophy:

Now it is on my shoulders. It is about my morals and my values. If I do something, then I will wonder if coach will question it and my leadership. When she says with freedom comes responsibility, it puts more responsibility on me to make my own decisions.

The phrase signifies a system implemented to develop maturity and responsibility and ultimately change the team chemistry to one occupied by good citizens. Inherent is academic accountability. “With freedom comes responsibility [sets] your standards to really high,” according to Allison.

The good citizen language is both a representation of the values of the administrators and coaches as well as a socialization instrument. Opportunity for administrator and especially coach speeches is one of the natural traits of an intercollegiate athletic organization. Every practice, game, and team meeting presents itself as a prospect for delivering a recurring theme. The SAU athletes are constantly exposed to the idea that they are to look and behave in ways that will positively reflect on the organization. That positive behavior clearly includes hard work in academics.

A Caring Organization

Coach Ross has a sign outside his office door that reads, “If you are a player, walk right in and if you are not a player then you have to check in with the secretary.” The intended message is that the players “are the priority.” Associated action is that Coach Ross will “stop whatever I’m doing, if a player walks in the door.” While responding to a question for this study, he does indeed stop to converse with a player at his door who is having course enrollment issues. He additionally creates a sense of priority for them by genuinely asking about their family rather than just focusing on athletics. Coach Ross’s sign signifies the common belief that this is indeed a caring organization. Non-verbal language clearly impresses this value upon the student-athletes. The many hugs given Dr. Rollins and her staff were mentioned earlier, but
James observes lots of hugs among all staff especially after extended holidays. As a result, he concludes “that there is a lot of love on this campus.” Coach Sumter notes that despite the administrators being very close to her program, “they pretty much hug all of the athletes.” The result according to her is that the athletes get the “family feeling.”

President Samuels also concludes that his actions convey the message of caring to the athletes versus verbal language. His presence at “all of the games, all of the sports” demonstrates his “accessibility” and subsequent caring. It is not just being at the game though that transmits the message. It is sitting in the front row of the volleyball game amongst the students and actively rooting for the team. It is greeting one of Coach Sumter’s athletes with a smile and patiently listening and agreeing to a request for a reference.

Caring language running through the organization ranges from Dr. Rollins’ comprehensive use of the term “sweetie” to the multiple references to themselves or others as family. A caring organization is reflected at the highest levels as observed in the weekly administrators meeting attended by the four administrator study participants as well as the head of each of the additional business and athletic units. The number one meeting agenda item is the deaths of two athletes’ grandmothers. Ms. Gannon, running the meeting during Ms. Bennett’s initial absence, highlighted the need for “support” for the athlete and “reassurance” for the parents from the organization that the athlete’s academic needs will be accommodated. With a major athletic department event on the horizon and NCAA certification process upcoming, ensuring support of athletes in difficult family circumstances took precedent. Caring language verbally and non-verbally signifies a commitment to the well-being of athletes and staff peers. Does it impact academics? Explaining the high graduation rate for his team, Jimmy surmises “knowing people care and you don’t want to let them down.”

Not recognized as a definitive characteristic of the organization, common language surrounding academics is not readily apparent to the participants. However universal language geared toward values that inherently include academics as a component creates a supportive environment for personal success. SAU athletes display language usage that reflects the expectation that they are to be role models and productive citizens off the field and that they are cared about as individuals. Subsequently their success off the field is a concern for the organization.

Rituals and Traditions

Rituals and traditions are the third area of socialization content identified as a dimension when academic culture can be transmitted at SAU. Two primary formal organization events serve this function. The end of the year athletic banquet reflects Ms. Bennett’s values and intent to physically show that academics are a priority. The banquet is an explicit academic cultural artifact that meets her goal and serves to motivate the student-athletes as well. Dr. Rollins designs and implements the spring academic recognition ceremony, publicly presenting the academically successful athletes to the campus community. Her unique event is also intended to motivate primarily through reward but also shame. These two administrators wield the largest influence over the overall academic culture. Appropriately, the two most important academic events in the organization are essentially their creations.
**The Banquet**

Ms. Bennett energetically describes the end of the year athletic banquet as one of the most influential ways that the department delivers its academic expectations to the student-athletes. Chiefly reflective of the organizational academic priorities at the banquet are the academic awards for the male and female athlete with the highest GPA for the year. Upon implementing athlete of the year awards several years ago, Ms. Bennett “insisted that we do an academic award.” She purposefully set out to design an award and ceremony to demonstrate “how important academics are.” “Let’s make this award look the best, be the most expensive.” Coach Holt verified that the “academic prize is larger than the athlete of the year prize,” while Coach Ward is genuinely impressed that the “academic trophies are the biggest trophies” at the banquet. In addition, presentation of the award is set for last. For Ms. Bennett, ending the banquet on that note tells the winners that they “are the cream of the crop … I think it is really special.” The resulting recognition by the peers of the academic winners is an indication to Ms. Bennett that the “signal” of the organization’s value on academics is getting across:

I have found that the rest of the student-athletes actually give them a standing ovation. Their teammates are actually fired up, and so excited that they won it. And when people look at it, they are like “Wow, you are going to have to give that to your mama.” I wanted it to be that way. So we are telling them that this is the value on you doing that, period.

The banquet is spoken of most highly by the top two administrators in the organization. “A huge and awesome event” creating jealousy among non-athletic administrators is how Ms. Gannon captures the affair. It brings a mixed reaction or non-reaction from the remaining participants. Some spring athletes seem disinterested because athletic commitments keep them from participating. The banquet however does serve as a symbol as Ms. Bennett intended and does impress some coaches and athletes. It demonstrates how culture can be physically reflected in artifacts and purposefully designed to signify the values of an organization. Simply making the academic award nicer than the athletic one and making that presentation last provides the context that academics come first.

**Spring Basketball Game**

One home men’s basketball game during the spring semester is chosen each year to recognize academically successful athletes during half-time. Dr. Rollins is responsible for arranging the date and coordinating the event. Qualified athletes must have a 3.0 or higher GPA from the previous semester and are “showcased” on the court during halftime. Her goal is to inspire and encourage the athletes through recognition and like Mary at the banquet, motivate those who are not being recognized. The value placed on academics by her and the organization emerges again through deliberate design.

All athletes are required to attend and a dress code is required for those appearing on court. Her purpose is for student-athletes to realize the prestige from receiving this recognition as well as to present them professionally to the general public. For two years, Dr. Rollins included just the athletes but has since decided to engage the coaches to enhance the ceremony. She wanted to “do something new and different and be inclusive of everyone because I believe if you include people you are able to get more out of them next time.” The outcome was a
“delight:”

The head coaches felt like they were getting a report card too. And I believe that you have your student-athletes out there receiving their academic honor, and you have coaches on the front line celebrating that…it would make student-athletes realize, "hey-it's more than the game, it's more than the ballgame- you know, my coach really, really cares about my academic success."

Noting increases in participation, she sees it as a “motivation piece.” Coach Sumter highlighted historically how the ceremony has grown. She participated as a student and commented how “it was just five of us standing there.” Indicating the growth of the ceremony as well as academic success of the athletes, “now…the court is packed.” Presenting certificates to the athletes is President Samuels, again demonstrating to the entire institution the value placed on academics.

Motivation generally occurs in a visual sense and from three perspectives. Student-athletes on the court are inspired by the crowd support. “They love it” is how Coach Sumter sees it. Just being in the limelight and “waving to their peers” is especially self-gratifying according to her. Showing her peers that they are “regular students” is a key point of the ceremony for Allison. “We came here to play a sport, but we can relate to them on a higher level.”

All athletes are required to attend the game and those not on the court have a different visual perspective. They are motivated by seeing their teammates on the court and receiving the adulation. Coach Davis recalls listening to student-athletes discuss feeling “left out” by not participating and she noted that the feelings are intensified “if there are 10 people on the team and 7 of them are being recognized.” “Just missing it (GPA of 3.0)" has been Jimmy’s scenario. He sees “the smiles on their faces” and appreciates their hard work, but clearly laments not being on the court. Last, Dr. Rollins said it was a “report card” for the coaches. The number of dean’s list student-athletes standing next to their coach is a visual public accounting for that team’s academic success. “It allowed the community to know who’s doing it and who is not.” She highlighted Coach Sumter’s program as a positive example, having gone from “three or four ladies” to the entire team. In her estimation, seeing the success of others ignites competitive coaching personalities and “just put everyone on blast.”

Initial analysis of the rituals and traditions regarding academics would reveal a limit in quantity and influence. Deeper exploration shows an organization that critically thinks about rituals and how they can be designed to reflect academic and compassion values. Not widely recognized for their importance in socializing the student-athletes to an academic culture, they are clearly an important piece of the culture puzzle. Several of the athletes in this study have been recognized formally and informally for academic success and they typically relish in the attention. Those who did not get recognized wished they were getting the attention.

Policies, language and rituals serve as vehicles to deliver the academic culture to student-athletes at SAU. Both formal and informal circumstances are created often with the purposeful intent of socializing both coaches and athletes to the organizational values and beliefs that emphasize academics. Purposeful intent is not effective however unless commitment and follow through are demonstrated by administrators and coaches. Commitment at SAU to the academic values shows up clearly in the policies, language and rituals discussed and results in a myriad of physical and visible artifacts that represent the culture. These artifacts are influential because the student-athletes experience the organization’s values and beliefs regarding being productive citizens, good students, and that they are cared about by the organization.
Discussion

NCAA statistics demonstratively indicate that the SAU athletic department is different. South Atlantic University is an exemplary HBCU in graduating its athletes. (2009 NCAA Report, n.d.). Despite significant struggles for most NCAA Division I HBCUs in graduation rates, SAU succeeds. The overall low rates of graduation at HBCUs attract both NCAA and national media attention. In order to explain the lack of success, the NCAA assigned insufficient financial resources as the primary cause for the concern (Carey, 2006). However, SAU’s athletic program performs exceptionally well in graduating its student-athletes yet faces the same resource obstacles. Absent financial resources as the sole determining variable, extensive literature and research connecting performance to organizational culture provides credibility to the likelihood that SAU has developed a positive academic culture that enhances student-athletes’ success.

Policies, language and tradition are critical elements in understanding the culture and socialization journey for student-athletes. Extensive analysis of those three cultural elements at work in SAU athletics reveals varying levels of influence. This applies to the idea of formal versus informal content as well. Policies enacted through academic services serve notice that classroom success is taken very seriously. Effectiveness derives from the creation of interactive opportunity with student-athletes who require the most attention and active enforcement of policy throughout the organization. Dedicated implementation of the policy and the presence of real consequences make the formal policies a more significant factor in the culture than the informal. Augmenting policy is the overall program design. Policy details are specifically geared toward enhancing student-athlete success and their implementation engages the efforts of the coaches to strengthen the outcomes. Well-designed policy coupled with their thorough execution makes policy a more significant socialization mechanism than language and ritual.

Certainly, both language and ritual are important cultural factors. Both verbal and nonverbal informal language, serves to transmit values of compassion and citizenship development. Two formal rituals are recognized for their positive reinforcement of student-athlete success, but also operate informally to motivate coaches and students to seek academic success in order to obtain the formal recognition. In light of the acquired data for socialization content means placing the formal policy created by academic services in a larger role, while understanding the importance of informal language and the two valued formal ceremonies.

Purposeful Design

Educational environments achieve success when “designed with an understanding of the dynamics and impact of human environments” rather than by “chance” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 2). Ample evidence suggests that thoughtful consideration in creating cultural content especially in policy and ritual contributes significantly to SAU’s overall congruent positive academic culture. Perhaps the best example lies in Ms. Bennett’s efforts at ensuring the spring awards banquet reflected the organizational priority of academics by making the academics trophy “look the best” and presenting it as the finale.

Policies are designed to have students exceed academic benchmarks and understand the organizational seriousness regarding academics through the gravity of the non-compliance consequences. The layout of the academic services center creates an atmosphere for rule enforcement encouraging work and not play as well as collaboration and support.
Coaches engage in academically-focused design through efforts such as Coach Mabel’s taking mobile phones away on trips and Coach Sumter’s collective running for the course attendance transgressions of one athlete. Both serve notice on the commitment to academics and are designed to make an impact. A positive academic culture in part exists for the entire organization because academic culture is consciously considered when designing and implementing policy.

**Applicable Lessons**

Twenty-five HBCUs compete in NCAA Division I athletics. Each is unique in a number of variables that will influence their own cultures and efforts at academics. However, common ground exists in athletics as the far majority of institutions compete in just two conferences. Institutionally, President Samuels highlighted that HBCUs traditionally serve students from an underserved population who might be a first-generation college student and from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Combined with the acknowledged lack of financial resources, HBCUs face common obstacles in their educational mission. SAU’s exceptional success while facing common obstacles allows for the consideration of applicable lessons to other HBCU athletic departments in creating and managing an academic culture.

There is no denying that SAU has its share of charismatic leaders at both the administrative and coaching levels, contributing to the idea of “great people” essentially creating the academic success. Certainly charisma and unique personalities do contribute, but there are other practical culture and socialization methods signified in SAU’s model recognized in the organizational culture literature as desirable and effective. Schein (2004) highlights a critical key “mechanism” for “embedding” and reinforcing culture includes “thoughtful design of organizational structure and systems, consideration for traditions and design of physical space” (p. 246). Schein is a pioneer and leading scholar in organizational culture research and theory. SAU’s effort at purposefully designing the cultural content to achieve academic success appears generalizable because in many ways it has been recognized previously in organizational culture literature for its excellence. Charismatic leadership is not a requirement in creating a desired culture in connection with organizational performance. Systematic consideration for cultural content is the lesson.

**Implications for Future Research**

Impetus for future research regarding the issue of HBCU athlete graduation rates rests on three considerations. First, there is a dearth of study examining the concern. This neglect is surprising, given the national media attention and interest that the matter has attracted from the NCAA. Secondly, the existence of an institution that appears to have found a solution combined with the data regarding the reality of a positive academic organizational culture suggests an expansion of the line of inquiry to fully comprehend possible associations between culture and academic success. Third, the presence of additional environmental variables recognized in the literature for impacting the socialization experience of undergraduate students suggests a need to further examine the phenomenon from additional perspectives.

Only one additional study (Taylor, 2005) addresses the issue of HBCU athletes and their academic struggles. Perhaps research has been limited because of the NCAA’s demonstrative explanation of lack of financial resources (Carey, 2006; Sander, 2009). With other variables
clearly at work and the issue continuing to raise concerns, comprehensive examination of the influences on positive and negative academic performance in HBCU athletic departments is required.

SAU’s ability to realize success while most HBCUs struggle was a primary motivation to embark on this case study. Having found a congruent academic culture, it is necessary to expand the sample and understand the student-athlete experience on other HBCU campuses. Comparative research is needed to truly understand SAU’s accomplishment and others’ labors. Are there real differences in cultural content amongst the HBCU athletic departments and do the differences correlate with graduation rates?

Two external environmental variables not considered for this study, but regarded by many of the participants were conference affiliation and the NCAA’s academic reform movement in the form of the Academic Progress Rate (APR). Conferences have different levels of revenue streams (Sander, 2009) with HBCU conferences traditionally being on the lower end. More importantly from the organizational culture perspective, conferences set varying expectations regarding compliance and academic achievement according to SAU administrators and coaches. The implication is that institutional achievement is directed at where the academic bar is set by the conference, whether high or low.

A public warning or penalty such as losing scholarships was handed out to 19 HBCUs in the most recent posting of APR (Sander, 2009). Administrators and coaches both describe being impacted by APR and the potential to lose scholarships. Receiving negative publicity for penalties is certainly foremost in their thoughts. Ms. Morris indicates that Ms. Bennett will specifically communicate with all coaches in APR difficulty after being informed of their below standard scores. Coach Ross illustrates the pressure to work with a student-athlete who is academically failing, because an athlete leaving school for academic reasons will negatively impact APR. External athletic affiliations set and monitor the academic standards necessary to compete. The impact on the organizational culture is unavoidable. The weight of the influence and the structure of the interaction with internal variables are issues worth examining, again given the gravity of the overall concern.

Bowen and Levin (2003) in their germinal work on the dichotomy between intercollegiate athletics and the educational mission of higher education suggest the ultimate solution is integrating the athletic culture into the academic one. SAU has accomplished this and has been able to adopt athletic and academic priorities, succeeding at both. Their cultural success, the extent of the problem, and the expansive intricacies and promise of organizational culture justify continued thoughtful inquiry.
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