Town & Gown...& Jerseys? NCAA Division III Athletics as Social Anchors

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The authors explore the potential for NCAA Division III athletic programs to act as social anchors within their respective communities. Using students and community members (n=504) from five different Division III institutions, measures of individual and overall social capital, community identity, and the degree of personal identification with the school and the school’s athletic teams were captured to explore the impact of Division III athletics on students and community stakeholders. Results indicate that Division III athletics does not have the same impact as prior research conducted with programs participating in larger levels of competition, yet the data reveal a cognitive connection between athletic programs and the surrounding communities. Implications of this connection are explored in terms of the impacts and effects of Division III athletics.
The relationship between universities and their host communities are often full of complexity, but with much potential. Community leaders have long recognized the potential impact of accommodating an institution of higher learning, and dating back at least to 1228 local governments have competed for the rights and benefits associated with hosting a local university (Lucas, 2006). Often referred to as ‘Town and Gown,’ the relations between university and community are typically explored in overcoming contention or ameliorating unfulfilled potential between academic institution and surrounding community. The overall bulk of literature on town and gown relations can be surmised into the university’s contribution to the overall sustainability of the town and gown relationship and to the community itself. The extent to which universities are engrained in their surrounding communities is perhaps best expressed through the sheer number of colleges and universities whose local communities bare names reflecting the presence of the university. Many large American universities like the University of Maryland in College Park, Texas A&M University in College Station, or The Pennsylvania State University in University Park echo the town and gown relations; but often overlooked are the number of smaller college who represent their local communities as well such as Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pennsylvania or Saint John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota.

The purpose of this research is to empirically examine the town-gown relationship and the extent to which universities act as a social anchor within a community context. That is, we seek to explore the role of athletics in anchoring the relationship between universities and their host communities (i.e. the town and gown relationship) and the extent to which athletics aids in sustaining the town and gown relationship. Past research (e.g., Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006) discovered the community members who attend university-related events, including athletics events, reported higher perceptions of the university as both an institution and as an asset to the community. Bromley (2006) posited that the use of athletics has been critical in the place-building process for colleges, universities, and communities, and that a school’s athletics programs combines with academic programs, location, residential life, and publicity into the proven commodities necessary to deliver a ‘block-buster brand’ (Sevier, 2002; Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). Yet, while strong underlying assumptions exist, there are little data to provide any support for these well-accepted conventions. Therefore, the current study empirically examined: 1) the ability of the university to contribute to the host community’s social sustainability and 2) the extent to which athletics contributed to the relationship between the university and the host community.

In accordance with the triple-bottom line paradigm of sustainability, for any town-gown relationship to be sustainable the relationship has to: 1) make sense economically over time, 2) be a good steward of environmental resources, and 3) integrate itself into the overall social fabric of the host community (Dempsey, Bramley, Power, & Brown, 2011). Most of the research regarding sustainability in the town-gown relationship has focused primarily on economic sustainability. College towns typically report higher educational attainment, greater white-collar employment, lower overall unemployment, and higher family income (Gumbrecht, 2003). Many of these are also built upon an extensive economic infrastructure that is based upon the college student as the primary consumer – a basis that results in the university serving as an “economic anchor” to the surrounding area (O’Mara, 2012). Local colleges may also drive economic development through such avenues as technological advancements and infrastructure improvement (Feldman, 2003) in addition to local and regional innovation (O’Mara, 2005).
The economic impact of local colleges is not always positive, often due to the well-known tax exempt status that allows academic institutions to escape contributing directly to the local tax base (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006). One particular metropolitan community went so far as to propose a 1% “Fair Share Tax” on student tuition in 2010 to increase its municipal revenues as compensation for lost tax bases due to the university (Fischer, 2010; Steinkamp, 1998).

In addition to economic sustainability, notions of environmental sustainability have received increased attention. Because of the universities position as a large landowner and property developer, colleges and universities often have significant physical impact upon the surrounding environment (Benneworth, Charles, & Madanipour, 2010). One of the most common environmental impacts is the condition of student housing or ‘student slums’ that surround campuses (Gumbrecht, 2008) which have led to city ordinances protecting the quality of the housing environment around campuses (Aggestam & Keenan, 2007). Additionally, issues such as loud parties, traffic congestion, and unkempt dwellings further exacerbate the environmental disconnect between the townspeople and the university sometimes leading to planning and zoning laws against construction of campus buildings and laboratories (Fell & Bailey, 2005; Miller, 2004; Weill, 2009). Still, most areas experience a rise in property values in being associated with the local campus environment (e.g. Gumbrecht, 2008) and universities often exist as a town or city’s largest overseer of local greenspace (Weill, 2009).

While the economic and environmental components of sustainability have been well studied, there remains a dearth of empirical data on the resulting social sustainability from the town-gown relationship. Though prior research has called the university the “prime symbol of institutional life” for the local community (Bromley, 2006, p. 2) and credited the university with playing an imperative role in place branding of the community (Benneworth et al., 2010), few studies have empirically examined the effect of universities on concepts like social cohesion, social capital, sense of community, community identity, or overall cultural values that contribute to the quality of life and effectiveness of a local community.

**Literature Review**

**College Athletics and Community Sustainability**

While the impact of intercollegiate athletics on the campus community has received great scholarly attention, the bulk of the literature is narrowly focused. Researchers have tended to focus on either the economic impact of athletics on the university (Clotfelter, 2011) or the often-tumultuous relationships between athletics and academic values with big time National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institutions (Sperber, 2000). Little empirical analysis has closely examined the effect of college athletics on components of social sustainability, and even fewer studies have explicitly explored this relationship within institutions outside of big-time college sports. There are, however, a few notable exceptions.

Toma (2003) found that athletics programs are often central to the branding process of universities, as spectator sports in college build communities of fans out of alumni, students, community residents, and others. Clopton (2008) showed the ability of college athletics to impact the sense of community of students on campus, a reiteration of Chalip’s (2006) earlier findings suggesting that sport teams could potentially help develop a sense of community among its followers. Team-identification among sport fans has also been found to deliver such social
benefits as social capital (Clopton & Finch, 2010) and a point of central identity for the campus as a whole (Heere & James, 2007; Swyers, 2005). Due to many of these proposed benefits, even in the face of alleged academic conflicts and financial difficulties, Kelly and Dixon (2011) reported that within the past five years some 38 schools have announced their intention to dramatically increase their athletic presence through the creation of new football programs.

While many of these articles point to college athletics’ impact on sense of community, a more recent study questioned the consistency of such an outcome. Warner, Shapiro, Dixon, and Harrison (2011) examined the impact of a newly established NCAA football program, finding no empirical evidence that the new program increased sense of community among students of the university. They concluded the elements necessary for fostering community were not present during the first year of competition, believing the team needed more time for exposure and the fans required more time to develop bonds and attachment necessary for levels of community to increase. In another study of a new college football team, Heere and Katz (2014) found that the new team significantly impacted how both students and alumni connect and identify with the larger university community. The discrepancy in these conclusions suggests that many of the stated social benefits of college sports may not be universal. Starting or sponsoring an intercollegiate football team may not inherently lead to positive communal outcomes; rather the social impact of the team depends on the manner in which the sport or organization is structured and implemented (Chalip, 2006).

In addition to creating social capital and a collective identity, college athletic programs may have other important social outcomes for both the campus community and larger surrounding communities. For instance, Goidel and Hamilton (2006) credited athletic success with enhancing the public’s perception of academic quality of those same institutions and Oriard (2001; 2009) wrote that college football programs serve as the flagship of the university and are better able to attract the attention of the students, the local community, and the media that any other campus program. Similarly along this notion is the belief that successful athletics programs – particularly football – contributes to the overall sustainability of the host community. What is yet to be tested, however, is whether or not intercollegiate athletic programs assist the university in anchoring the social sustainability between university and town.

Furthermore, many of the above mentioned findings take place exclusively in the presence of ‘big-time’ college sports. Oriard (2009), for example, discussed only the highest level of football competing institutions, those in the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). Many of the presented findings, then, may not apply to the smaller level of competition, namely the NCAA’s Division III athletics. Division III programs are not allowed to grant athletic scholarships of any kind, rarely receive media coverage outside of their immediate locales, and largely play in front of much smaller audiences than their “big-time” Division I peers (Fulks, 2013; NCAA, 2013; NCAA, 2013a). In an aggregate sense, these differences provide sufficient reasoning for exploring the social effects of athletics in a Division III setting.

**History of Division III Athletics**

Following World War II, the overwhelming growth of the American economy and higher education system in particular created a growing chasm between the smaller schools within the NCAA membership and the larger institutions. As a result of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (i.e., GI Bill), many of the public land-grant institutions experiences incredible growth in terms of enrollment and public funding while most of the nation’s smaller colleges remained...
The growing discrepancy between small and large institutions began voicing their dissatisfaction with the lack of championship opportunities (Fallas, 1981).

The NCAAs first attempt at resolving the lack of competition opportunities for smaller members resulted in a two-divisional format commonly known as the College-University alignment (Katz & Seifried, In Press). Accordingly, the NCAA set up separate championship opportunities for smaller “colleges” in addition to the tradition national championships for the larger “universities.” The NCAA offered no concrete difference between the two divisions thus colleges and universities were free to choose their own placement for individual seasons and individual sports. This alignment proved short-lived, as small institutions continued to pressure the NCAA leadership for more equal opportunities for athletic success.

The current three-division format, and the creation of Division III athletics, occurred in 1973 following a multiyear effort by the NCAA leadership to restructure the entire organization of the NCAA. Following a failed proposal at the National Convention in 1973, the NCAA held their first-ever Special Convention later in the year, where the delegates approved the three-divisional format in overwhelming fashion. Consequently, Division III was formed from the 233 institutions that chose to participate in the NCAA’s newest division in 1973 (Katz & Seifried, In Press). Division III has grown tremendously over the past several decades and is presently the largest of the NCAA’s divisions. Consistent with their philosophy of placing the highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience, Division III does not permit the granting of any athletic scholarships and aims to treat student-athletes no differently than non-athletes.

As a result of Division III’s emphasis on academic excellence and their refusal to grant athletic scholarships, most Division III programs lack the exposure, fan support, and financial backing of their ‘big-time’ Division I brethren. As an example, while the highest spending Division I programs (i.e., University of Texas) spend in excess of $130 million annually on athletics, the largest Division III budgets (i.e., Amherst College, Middlebury College), spend around $5 million annually (EADA, 2012). Division III programs typically have much smaller stadiums, report much lower attendance figures, and rarely (if ever) receive revenues from media rights for their contests (Fulks, 2013; NCAA, 2013; NCAA, 2013a). Yet Division III is the NCAA’s largest division with 442 total members, and roughly 40% of NCAA student-athletes compete at Division III institutions (NCAA, 2011).

In the aggregate, then, the organization and history of Division III athletics has created a very different sporting structure, which results in a very different sporting product than the more popular Division I programs. While many scholars applaud the Division III model over the often-criticized Division I approach (Williams, Colles, & Allen, 2010; Brand, 2006; Simon, 2010) on largely philosophical reasoning, there exists a dearth of research examining if these Division III programs have the same potential for social sustainability in their surrounding communities.

Social Anchor Theory

Research questions for the current study were framed across the Social Anchor Theory, or SAT. The basis of SAT is grounded in community development and posits that community (in its myriad forms) is built of social networks that are “anchored” to the community (Clopton & Finch, 2011; Seifried & Clopton, 2013). In fact, while numerous institutions effectively serve to build networks and connect community members to each other, these social networks run the
risk of diminishing, or even dissolving, should they not be anchored into the fabric of the community context. Thus, any exploration of the contribution that a college or university and its athletics program provide to the social sustainability of the community must incorporate this notion of social anchors and social anchoring. This is, in part, due to these organizations acting as the hubs of the social networks and of the development of services and programs they provide for the community members (Hill & Cooke, 2013).

Social anchors integrate themselves into the social context of a community – consequently impacting social sustainability within the community. According to Social Anchor Theory, these organizations or institutions can be tested through their ability to generate social capital (i.e. quality of social networks) and a collective identity amongst community members, such as a community identity (Clopton & Finch, 2011; Seifried & Clopton, 2013). Recent research utilizing the Social Anchor Theory demonstrated the existence of cultural institutes as social anchors – an existence suggested by Clopton and Finch (2011) and later revealed through their connection of physical presence to the cultural framework of a community (Bressan & Alonso, 2013).

For a social anchor to exist, it must build upon both bonding and bridging social capital (e.g. Putnam, 2000) amongst those individuals in the community (Clopton & Finch, 2011). Bonding social capital refers to the dense, more homogeneous networks that community members create and maintain among themselves. This aspect of social capital is derived from like-minded individuals who create an element of ‘thick trust’ (e.g. Newton, 1997) among them that aids in preserving the social networks over time. Clopton and Finch (2011) also noted that social anchors build upon bridging social capital throughout the particular context. Here, the bridging social capital element is constructed of loose, less dense, more heterogeneous groups and relationships (e.g. Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital is created when diverse groups of individuals form new relationship or social networks. These new social connections will be less intimate and far more casual, yet begin to provide a mechanism for members to tap into diverse pools of resources contained within otherwise-secluded-bonded networks. The level of trust within these networks is much thinner than the trust underpinning bonding social capital (Newton, 1997), but the more superficial connection is what helps to grease the wheels of an effectively-functioning social community (e.g. Putnam, 2000).

Currently, extant literature is mixed regarding the extent to which the presence of athletics can impact the social capital within particular communities. Examining students surrounding a newly added football program within a university context, Warner, et al. (2011) found no evidence of an increased sense of community among students on campus, yet Heere and Katz (2014) found a significant impact of a new football team on the ways in which students and alumni identify with the university. Outside of a new sport team setting, Clopton and Finch (2010) found a significant contribution regarding the extent to which students identified with their school’s athletics teams (i.e. team identity) upon their resultant social capital. However, follow-up studies revealed that when able to control for university identity (i.e. the extent to which students identified with their college or university) in the relationship, team identity actually detracted from the students’ social capital and showed no relationship at all with bridging social capital (Clopton, 2011).

The use of social identities also stems from the second component of social anchors – the collective identity (Clopton & Finch, 2011). Collective identity is rooted originally in Social Identity Theory (e.g. Tajfel, 1978) where individuals construct social identities (beyond that of a personal identity) to which they actively associate and maintain. From there, Common Ingroup
Identity Model (Gaertner, Dovidio, Rust, Nier, Banker, Ward, Mottola, & Houlette, 1999) explains the role of collective identities as individuals maintain numerous social identities creating ingroups and outgroups, through which membership or exclusion dictates numerous outcomes (e.g. Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007; Foels & Tomcho, 2005). However, it is a common ingroup that supersedes the multiple social identities and has the potential to exist as a superordinate identity to which large groups can identity (Gaertner et al., 1999). While some collective identities are integral to an individual’s everyday life (e.g., vocation, gender), others are more abstract and symbolic in nature (e.g., nation, state, religion). For the more abstract social identities, such as university identity, traditions and rituals may help individuals identify and engage with their ingroups (Ashforth et al., 2004; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) through activities such as the singing of the school alma mater. Outside of smaller rituals or traditions, sport in general is seen as a powerful instrument for symbolism and provides a number of salient cues for individuals to connect with regarding identity (Heere & James, 2007).

Beginning with the seminal work of Wann and Branscombe (1993), sport management scholars have consistently used Social Identity Theory to explore the psychological connection between individual fans and sport teams. Prior research has linked identification with a sport team with psychological outcomes such as well-being (Wann, 2006), consumer behavior outcomes like attendance (Wakefield, 1995), and a plethora of other outcomes. More recent literature has reconceptualized the relationship between sport and Social Identity Theory as a multidimensional phenomenon (Dimmock, Grove, and Eklund, 2005), which has been used to explain, among other things, the formation of fans for new sport teams (Heere & Katz, 2014; Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009). Sport social identity carries positive psychological benefits that allow individuals to connect with others in non-threatening and beneficial ways (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011). Also, sports teams are often viewed as symbols for larger, more abstract social groups such as cities or universities and provide opportunities for individuals to experience these communities through direct interaction (Heere & James, 2007; Seifried & Clopton, 2013).

Still, a paucity of research has explored the specific connection between social anchoring, social sustainability and the impact of sport or athletics. Alonso and O’Shea (2012) and Seifried and Clopton (2013) utilized the Social Anchor Theory (Clopton & Finch, 2011) framework to explore the social-anchoring-potential of a professional sport organization. They discovered that professional sport organizations did fulfill the role of the ‘social anchor’ in terms of community relations and overall community development. Moreover, the anchoring from the sport organizations was largely the result of the social capital that resulted from quality social interaction.

Yet, despite the lengthy literature on the impacts of college athletics a dearth of research exists beyond the NCAA Division I and Bowl Championship Series (BCS) levels of competition, where the smaller scale of athletics allows NCAA Division III institutions with an opportunity for more intimate community-building. This lack of research beyond the upper-echelons of college sports has failed to elucidate the connection between athletics and the various campus communities across levels of competition beyond “big-time” college sports, where the majority of intercollegiate athletic programs participate. Nearly 40% of NCAA student-athletes compete at 442 Division III institutions (NCAA, 2011) and these high levels of participation alone demonstrate the need for more research on the impacts of specifically Division III athletic departments on their campus and surrounding communities. Therefore, the intent of this
research is to explore the extent to which the presence of Division III athletics anchors the town-gown relationship and aids in sustaining this unique relationship.

Method

Since Division III institutions constitute a wide spectrum of universities in terms of size, location, and type, research participants were obtained from five purposefully sampled institutions from various regions of the United States: one institution each from the Northeast, West, Middle Atlantic, Midwest, and Great Lakes regions as defined by the NCAA. Purposeful sampling was utilized due to the exploratory nature of the study, as Gratton and Jones (2010) proposed was possible, because no other studies have attempted to quantify the relationship between Division III athletics, the university, and the host community. Additional, extant literature has also recommended this particular sampling technique because of the method’s ability to capture latent and overt information from a very specific focus group (e.g. Gratton & Jones, 2010; Trochim, 2001).

Our very specific group of colleges and universities consists of both private and public institutions, rural and urban locations, highly selective and less selective, low enrollments and much higher enrollments, plus a combination of athletically successful and considerably less successful institutions. The five diverse institutions were specifically selected to represent the wide spectrum of institutions that participate in Division III athletics. While five schools cannot constitute a perfectly generalizable sample size, the choice of these five institutions was designed to promote diversity in the results and prevent redundancy based on institutional type in the data.

Participant Selection

Due to the need to examine the position of athletics within the larger surrounding community, participants were chosen from both internal and external university stakeholder groups. For internal stakeholders, random sampling procedures were followed for selecting participants within each of the five institutions included in the study. Students at each institution were randomly chosen from their university’s online directory and contacted via email requesting their participation in the study. For external stakeholders, (i.e. community members not directly affiliated with the university), convenience sampling and a snowball approach was used to recruit participants. The researchers contacted neighborhood associations, community groups, and local news media requesting their assistance in recruiting community members to participate in the study. Contact information for these groups was found using Internet searches and by contacting local government officials via email. External stakeholders were excluded if they indicated any professional relationship (i.e. professor, staff member) with the university. Thus, the external members were not directly tied to the university. The other inclusion criteria requirement was the participants had to consider themselves a member of the community in which the college resides; any respondent who answered “no” to the resident question or “yes” to the professional relationship question was excluded from the study.

In all, a total of 1,464 individuals were recruited for a total subject list representing all five of the chosen schools. A total of 672 participants responded for an overall response rate of 45.9%. After removing incomplete questionnaire (n = 168), the study was left with an overall usable response rate of 34.4%. The responses were pooled into a single data set because the stated research objective was not to compare different Division III institutions, but rather to
explore Division III institutions in general. Future research may consider comparing private to public, rural to urban, or athletically successful versus non-successful institutions, but this was beyond the aim of this study. Using a single pool of participants allowed the data analysis to provide findings general to the Division III level of participation.

Instrumentation

**Social Capital Scale.** An adaptation of Williams’ (2006) Internet Social Capital Scale was used to measure social capital. The ISCS is comprised of two subscales – Bonding Social Capital and Bridging Social Capital – with each having ten items, such as “The people I interact with in this community would put their reputation on the line for me” and “There are people in this community I can turn to about making very important decisions” as bonding examples; and “Interacting with people in this community makes me feel connected to the bigger picture” and “Talking with individuals in the community make me interested in what people unlike me are thinking” as bridging examples. Each item was scored on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (the lowest level of statement agreement) to 7 (the highest level of statement agreement). The original offline version of the ISCS reported acceptable reliability (α = .89) and has been used in both online community settings (e.g. Shiau, 2008) and traditional community settings (e.g. Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008) where it met statistical standards of validity. Williams (2006, p.12) specifically designed the scale to “account for bridging and bonding in online and offline contexts.” For the current study, the ISCS reported high reliability with Cronbach’s α = .91. Further, the ISCS displayed an acceptable level of reliability in both subscales with bonding (α = .85) and bridging (α = .93).

**Community Identity.** To obtain both community identity and university identity measures, an adaptation of the Mael’s (1989) organizational identity scale was included. Using this, community identity was defined as the extent to which each individual identified as a member of his or her local community. Participants responded to five items assessing their level of identification with the community along a seven-point Likert-type scale. The CSES has an original Cronbach’s α of .84 and sufficient validity measures within previous research. The CSES also reported acceptable reliability in the current study (α = .84). Items for the community identity measure included “I am very interested in what others think about my community,” “When I talk about my community I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they’,” “My community’s successes are my successes,” and “When someone praises this community, it feels like a personal compliment.” The community was defined as the town/city in which the college is located. For each of the five included institutions, both internal and external respondents were provided a survey that included the name of the local town/city as their community.

**University Identity.** Similarly, the organizational identity instrument was used to ascertain the university identity measure. Here, university identity was defined as the extent to which each individual identified with the local university. Participants responded to five items assessing their level of identification with the school along a seven-point Likert-type scale. The scale has an original Cronbach’s α of .84 and has been used for university identification in past research with strong validity (e.g. Mael, 1989). Also similar to before, the university identity iteration of the organizational identity instrument in this proved to be a reliable measure (α = .86). Items for the community identity measure included “I am very interested in what others think about this university,” “When I talk about the university I usually say ‘we’ rather than...”
'they’,” “This university’s successes are my successes,” and “When someone praises this university, it feels like a personal compliment.”

Team Identity. The final independent variable of team identity was ascertained by the Sport Spectatorship Identification Scale (SSIS; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), which measures the extent to which individuals identify with a sports team or program. The SSIS is one of the most popular tools for measuring fan identification, and has been found to be both reliable and valid across a wide-range of sport contexts (Gratton & Jones, 2010). This seven–item Likert-type scale asks the participants such questions as “How important to you is it that the (school’s teams) win?” and “During the season, how closely do you follow the (school’s teams)?” (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). With a Cronbach’s α = .91, the SSIS has been used in many research studies to assess an individual’s team identification level and the extent to which that affects integration into, and perceptions of, the university (Wann & Robinson, 2002), and alumni contributions (Wann & Somerville, 2000).

Analysis

To explore the research questions centering on universities as social anchors and any contribution to that anchoring from athletics, an initial set of hierarchical linear regression analyses were constructed utilizing university identity, and then team identity, as predictors. Because social anchoring requires bonding social capital and bridging social capital, as well as a collective identity, we ran three separate regressions with bonding social capital, bridging social capital, and community identity as the dependent variables. Secondly, because we were also interested in the potential town-gown divide between the perceptions regarding the university and athletics, these same regressions were run separately for the student internal stakeholder group and for the community external stakeholder group.

Results

Interestingly, initial analyses suggest that the Division III athletics programs show very little social anchoring potential within their respective communities. Of the social anchor components, only overall community identity was predicted by team identity ($\beta = .10, p < .05$). Conversely, university identity showed strong potential as a social anchor – one that suggests a healthy town-gown relationship. Of the three social anchoring components, community identity displayed significant prediction of bonding social capital ($\beta = .23, p < .001$), bridging social capital ($\beta = .36, p < .001$), and community identity ($\beta = .53, p < .001$). Not surprisingly, the social anchoring components were significantly connected with the amount of years each individual lived in town, predicting bonding social capital ($\beta = .21, p < .05$), bridging social capital ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), and community identity ($\beta = .15, p < .05$).
However, there were two demographical findings that appeared particularly noteworthy. First, gender was found to significantly detract from bridging social capital ($\beta = -0.10, p < .05$). This finding echoed previous research (e.g. Putnam, 2000) with female community members displaying higher levels of social activity and, consequently, bridging social capital. Second, there was nominal, but significant, correlation between race and community identity ($r = .11, p < .05$). The correlation suggests the presence of a slight racial difference between white community members and non-white community members regarding the extent to which each categorical group identifies with the larger community. Such a potential existence is particularly salient when the local university and athletics are brought into the context as research has shown significant racial differences in the perceptions of the impact of athletics upon a community (e.g. Clopton & Bourke, 2012).

Finally, one’s status as an undergraduate student was a strong determinant of the social anchoring variables, including bonding social capital ($\beta = -.31, p < .01$), bridging social capital ($\beta = -.31, p < .01$), and community identity ($\beta = -.33, p < .001$). Thus, the same set of three regression analyses were ran for the university student group, and for the community member group. Results here suggest a more telling illustration of the social anchoring brought about by the university and its athletics teams for these Division III institutions.
First, for the community members, team identity had no contribution as a social anchor in the community for bonding social capital, bridging social capital, or community identity. Furthermore, for the community members, their university identity contributed nothing significant to their social capital levels, including bonding and bridging measures. One particularly notable finding here was the significant presence of race, which detracted from the bridging social capital of the community members ($\beta = -0.24, p < .05$). The fact that the race presence did not occur in the total sample, but rather with the students removed from the analysis, suggests that perhaps the surrounding community is constructed of a social environment that is less conducive to overcoming differences, developing new relationships, and broadening across personal diversity – particularly in terms of racial demographics.

### Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Predicting Social Anchor Measures of Local Community Members (N = 194)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Bonding Social Capital</th>
<th>Bridging Social Capital</th>
<th>Community Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>SE $B$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-4.80</td>
<td>7.04</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years lived in town</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked at college</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering freq. in local bus./trade organizations</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering freq. in local sport/social organizations</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Identity</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Identity</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note for Bonding Social Capital. $R^2 = .21, p = .100$ for Step 1; $R^2_\Delta = .01, p = .489$ for Step 2

Note for Bridging Social Capital. $R^2 = .19, p < .05$ for Step 1; $R^2_\Delta = .01, p = .285$ for Step 2

Note for Community Identity. $R^2 = .65, p < .001$ for Step 1; $R^2_\Delta = .01, p = .225$ for Step 2

*values significant at the .05 level ** values significant at the .01 level *** values significant at the .001 level
Conversely, university identity was the overwhelming social anchor for students—seemingly existing as the main conduit into the surrounding community. University identity significantly predicted bonding social capital ($\beta = .28, p < .01$), bridging social capital ($\beta = .40, p < .001$), and community identity ($\beta = .56, p < .001$). Moreover, beyond the contribution of university identity was the connection between team identity and community identity. While team identity showed no ability to contribute to the social capital of the student respondents (bonding or bridging), identifying with the institution’s athletics teams did contribute to the overall community identity of the students ($\beta = .12, p < .05$). Moreover, the team identity variable did not impact social networks as it has in the past with previous research (e.g. Clopton & Finch, 2010) nor was there any positive spillover from athletics to the community members in this study, team identity and athletics did seem to exist as a potential medium for connecting students into the greater community through community identity. This finding alone suggests that team identity may play a role in contributing to the social sustainability of the community. This contribution may be occurring through a positive spillover of identifying with the athletics teams on campus for those students who may have come from out-of-town, out of state, and have no other connection to the surrounding community. Identifying with their school’s athletics teams may exist as a gateway into connecting with the larger community.

### Discussion

This study provides insight into the existence of the town-gown relationship between Division III institutions and their surrounding communities. By comparing the effect of the town-gown relationship between students and community members, it became clear that the athletics programs did play a role in the college students identifying with their communities. Lacking the large alumni presence and budgets of many larger Division I institutions, Division III athletics may be one of the few conduits into connecting with the local community. Of the schools sampled in this study, most are located in smaller communities. Even those schools technically...
located in a larger, urban area are often placed in more secluded neighborhoods or sections of the community. Such communities are generally associated with strong bonding communities, and are thus less welcoming to those perceived as ‘outsiders’ (Agnitsch, Flora, & Ryan, 2006; Wuthnow, 2002).

Since roughly 81% of Division III schools are private (NCAA, 2011), many of the students attending these schools are not originally from the surrounding area. Especially for the highly selective schools, geographic diversity of students is considered a point of pride, as schools dedicate considerable resources to recruiting and admitting students from various locales. In this sense, the more tight-knit communities may be less willing to accept, and identity with, college students from outside their local area. Rather than accepting these transplanted residents as full-members of the community, town members may instead view them more as aliens simply residing in the town for four years. For many of these schools, a small percentage of graduating students actually remain in the community, thus eliminating the presence of an accepting alumni population within the town, and reinforcing the notion that these college students are simply ‘visitors’ to the town rather than residents.

The finding that identifying with the institution’s athletics teams did contribute to the overall community identity of the students is a significant finding. Many incoming students, especially those from out of region/out of state, have little cognitive attachment to their new surroundings. In fact, it is likely that many incoming students have never even spent time in their communities besides a short campus tour or interview the previous year. As such, the connection between team identity and community identity proves that Division III athletics may serve as bridge to ease the transition for out-of-town students and their new towns. Since the college students and the community members may have little in common, especially in the socio-economic and political sense, the college team may serve as the connection for new students between the town and school.

Further additional research is suggested to explore the basis of the existence of race in the current study. Any existence of race and other personal demographic variables echo some of the issues suggested in previous literature regarding town and gown connections. Many Division III institutions, especially the highly selective ones, are among the most expensive schools in the country. Several of these institutions charge upwards of $50,000 for annual tuition, and as such may be populated from students from predominantly wealthy families. While scholarships and financial aid efforts may decrease the correlation between family income and school choice, the expensive reputation may be a detriment to the connection between town and gown. The finding that race was not significant for the entire sample population, but was significant only once removing the students, suggests a notion where townspeople may view these often expensive/selective colleges as representative of specific races and social classes.

Partially due to the high cost and selectivity nature of these schools, the student populations of many Division III schools (like many of their Division I peers) may be more homogenous that their surrounding town. Since people tend to associate sports teams with the associated communities they perceive them to represent (Heere & James, 2007), minority community members may specifically reject identifying with these institutions based on the associated community with which they view them (elitist, rich, etc.). Yet explaining differences in sport fans’ motivation and race is a difficult task. Wann, Bilyeu, Brenna, Osborn, and Gambouras (1999) were unable to adequately explain differences in their data between Euro-American and African American participants, claiming the most logical explanations were cultural flaws in the development of their scale.
The fact that many of these schools lack students from the surrounding area and are populated by young students with often very different political opinions or socio-economic upbringings as their new community may prevent any townspeople from more strongly identifying with the college and its sports teams. Rather than accepting college students as new members of their often tight-knit communities, these townspeople may collectively reject these students as ‘outsiders’ and largely ignore their presence in the community for the four years in which they reside there. Bilyeu and Wann (2002), in a follow up study to Wann et al. (1999), contend that racial minorities may receive greater pride for their own ethnic group’s recognized success in sport. If townspeople do consider students as transient or temporary members of the town, perhaps that same explanation applies, partially explaining why race and class were only significant variables when excluding the internal stakeholders from the analysis.

The gender finding is more difficult to explain; especially considering most Division III institutions (again like their Division I peers) have a higher percentage of female students than male (Fink, Pastore, & Riemer, 2003). For students of Division III schools, females may not consider the athletics department significant aspects of their social lives. In a study that differentiated between male and female fans, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, and Jacquemotte (2000) found that females are more likely to be a sport fan for social reasons, while men are more likely to be a fan because of played sports or enjoyed sports in general. With lower attendance than other ‘big-time’ sporting events, and the absence of tailgates or watch parties typically associated with more popular or commercialized sport contexts, Division III sports may lack the socializing component more important to female fans than males.

Without television coverage and media attention, attending games is the most direct route to identifying with Division III athletics. James and Ridinger (2002) found that males rated each individual motive for attendance higher than females; the three motives rated highest by females (Action, Escape, and Drama) may be less fulfilled by the lower level of competition than in more commercialized or professionalized contexts. Since males derive a more salient social identity from their relationship to sport (James & Ridinger, 2002), males may be less likely to change their participation or identification as sport fans based on the absence of certain consumption motives. While more research is needed to verify this, the data in this study suggest that female sport fans may be characterized by a higher degree of elasticity in their identification with sport teams than male counterparts. Without several of the consumption motives present, the change in identification, as a fan, appears to be greater for females than males.

Unlike at ‘big-time’ Division I schools where the constant television attention, media reporting, massive stadiums/practice facilities, and raised status levels of athletes makes the existence of athletics impossible to ignore, students at Division III schools may be able to identify with other aspects of campus life as more important to their identity with the college. One of our sampled schools, for instance, listed the school’s dance and theatre department as far more significant than their athletics teams, and even comments that the annual dance concerts consistently have higher attendances and media coverage than the athletic events. This idea is consistent with Putnam’s assertion that females are more actively socially. Without large attendance, pregame activities promoting communitas, or shared group experience via one’s identification as fan at the Division III level, female students are more likely to identity with other groups on campus, such as theatre/dance, community service organization, or sororities than are male students, and thus do not rely on athletics as their connecting point with the university.
Ultimately, results seem to further convolute the findings of past research efforts, thus, highly iterating the need for further and more profound research explorations into the connection between sport and social sustainability. Still, these results do support Smith’s (2009) statement that while sport is often credited with providing social benefits to a community, little impact may occur and even fewer of these benefits may be leveraged into something sustainable. Here, although performed on a smaller and more-intimate setting, the physical and cognitive place of Division III athletics does not have the same impact as the larger levels of competition. Not surprisingly, it is the overall universities in each of these contexts that live up to the “town and gown” relationships and exist as social anchors. While these findings suggest limitations to marketing strategies, they also provide potential opportunities for Division III institutions and their communities. Although no social capital benefits resulted from connecting with these athletics teams, there was a cognitive connection between athletics and the community. This is an element that can be embraced and expanded upon by marketing strategies in NCAA Division III athletics. While it may not be about the team or sport, community members do connect with the school and the community. We recommend that future research examine this connection with a qualitative exploration, one that would illuminate the numerous intricacies of the unique connection between communities and institutions and highlight the characteristics of programs that have developed stronger connections with their community members. A qualitative study may help develop a “blueprint” for stimulating a stronger town-gown relationship that increases the social sustainability between the college and community.

Before addressing the managerial implications from the results of this study, it is important to recognize the limitations of the current research design. Namely, because a random sampling procedure was used for internal stakeholders (students) but a convenient sampling technique for external stakeholders (community members), there may be an element of population bias when comparing those two groups. The convenience sampling targeted community organizations and groups, and thus the respondents within this stakeholder group may represent a more engaged and active portion of the overall community population. Another limitation in terms of generalizability warrants mentioning as well. Division III athletics are a rather specific level of competition in sport, and thus the conclusions of this study should only be carefully extended to realms outside of Division III athletics. Finally, the methodological decision to pool the various institutions into a single data set may represent a limitation as well. While this technique was used to explore general findings for Division III as a whole, sample sizes large enough to differentiate between types of Division III institutions may offer important extensions of the current research.

Managerial Implications

The most significant finding for intercollegiate athletic departments outside of “big-time” college sports is the cognitive connection between athletics and the community. While athletics at the Division III level may not have the popularity and reputational impact as “big-time” Division I programs, this cognitive connection implies that Division III athletics can serve as bridge between college and community and anchor the town-gown relationship. The community members in this study demonstrated an awareness of their local athletics, and awareness is a key foundational step in developing a stronger psychological connection between the college and the surrounding community. Though the presence of Division III athletics alone may not be salient
enough to anchor the town-gown relationship independently, it does provide an important underpinning from which other components of the university may enhance.

Managers and administrators at these institutions should focus their athletic marketing at best representing the school. For example, Muhlenberg College many years ago changed their team mascot from the Cardinals to the Mules, an obvious parallel to the institution’s name. Likewise, the Haverford College athletics logo is an image of their famous Union Building, rather than the actual team mascot, the Black Squirrel. Like the Mules, representations of Union Building connect fans with the actual college itself, not solely its athletic teams. For Muhlenberg and Haverford, like many Division III institutions, the reputations and importance of the school as an academic institution far outweighs those values as an athletic program. The more their athletic teams can identify with the academic qualities of the institution, the more successful their athletic programs can be in serving as a social anchor for the campus and surrounding communities.

Additionally, school administrators may wish to take advantage of the connection of students between team identity and community identity, especially in their orientation processes. While Division III athletics may not play as central a role in adjusting to campus life as some Division I counterparts, orientations often identity adjusting to new surroundings as one of their primary goals, and perhaps Division III athletics can help meet those desired outcomes. The student development literature has long recognized the importance of involvement (Astin, 1984), and Division III athletics may represent an outlet for enhancing student involvement; not just through participating as an athlete but also via participation as a fan. The gender findings from this study likewise support the idea that decision-makers at the Division III level should try and enhance the social opportunities for students via their intercollegiate teams. Perhaps it is through dance teams, pep clubs, bands, or other extracurricular activities surrounding the sport team that Division III sports can most effectively promote socializing activities and serve as a means to enhance involvement by students.

Finally, social activities like tailgating or communal watch parties may also be effective tools for leveraging the social impact of Division III sports. While these communal activities are more commonly associated with “big-time” college sports, tailgating is potentially helpful strategy for building new fans or strengthening the support for weaker sport brands (Katz & Heere, 2013). Division III schools may never develop the types of communal tailgates popular in places like Louisiana State University or The Ohio State University, but small-scale social activities based around the athletic teams might be a promising step in increasing the cognitive connection between athletics and community into a relationship based on behavioral involvement.
References


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