

## **Southeastern Conference Recruiting and the Maintenance of Power-5 College Sport**

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**Chris Corr**

*University of South Carolina*

**Richard M. Southall**

*University of South Carolina*

**Mark S. Nagel**

*University of South Carolina*

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*Members of National Collegiate Athletic Association Power-5 Conference athletic departments perform institutional work to maintain a shared institutional logic. However, within Power-5 athletic departments there are also subcultures (e.g., subunits) that perform institutional work in conflict with espoused institutional ceremonial facades. Within this research context, this study examined official visit itineraries from a sample of Southeastern Conference (SEC) athletic departments as institutional work products that reflect a negotiated institutional terrain within which athletic department sub-units make decisions regarding the amount of time dedicated to social, athletic, and academic activities. The current study reports the findings from an examination of (n = 76) SEC official visit itineraries across (n = 21) sports. Overall, findings revealed official visit itineraries emphasized social and athletic activities, while minimizing or ignoring academic activities. Male sports – particularly male revenue sports – dedicated significantly less time to academic activities. Not surprisingly, profit sport official visits involved significantly more social and athletic activities than both revenue sports and non-revenue sports. These findings support the need for additional research across Power-5 conferences to determine whether the differences found within SEC athletic departments exist across the institutional field of Power-5 college sport.*

*Keywords: recruiting, official visits, institutional work, institutional logics*

While all college athletes, their families, and fans of every college sport are emotionally invested in “their” sport, the level of scrutiny and financial investment in recruiting is most pronounced at the NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level, among what have become known as the “Power-5” and “Group of 5” conferences. The Power-5 conferences include the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference (Big-10), Big XII Conference (Big XII), Pacific-12 Conference (PAC-12), and Southeastern Conference (SEC). The Group of 5 conferences include the American Athletic Conference (AAC), Conference USA (C-USA), Mid-American Conference (MAC), Mountain West Conference (MWC), and Sun Belt Conference (Sun Belt).

The apex of college-sport recruiting takes place within Power-5 athletic departments that have budgets that routinely exceed \$100 million. Table 1 highlights the ten Power-5 athletic departments with the highest revenues and expenses. Within the Power-5 institutional field, football and men’s basketball are the sports that provide almost all athletic department revenues. Much of the revenues are dispersed to athletic departments from Power-5 conference media rights (See Table 2.)

Table 1  
*Top-Ten Power-5 Athletic Department Revenues-Expenses*

Rk	Univ.	Conf.	Total Revenues	Total Expenses
1	Texas	Big XII	\$214,830,647	\$207,022,323
2	Texas A&M	SEC	\$211,960,034	\$146,546,229
3	Ohio State	Big Ten	\$185,409,602	\$173,507,435
4	Michigan	Big Ten	\$185,173,187	\$175,425,392
5	Alabama	SEC	\$174,307,419	\$158,646,962
6	Georgia	SEC	\$157,852,479	\$119,218,908
7	Oklahoma	Big XII	\$155,238,481	\$132,910,780
8	Florida	SEC	\$149,165,475	\$131,789,499
9	LSU	SEC	\$147,744,233	\$131,717,421
10	Auburn	SEC	\$147,511,034	\$132,885,979

Note. (Flaherty, 2018, 247sports.com).

Table 2  
*Power Conference Revenue Distributions*

Conference	2019 Distribution	Per-member
Big Ten	\$760 million	\$54.0 million
SEC	\$660 million	\$43.7 million
Big XII	\$374 million	\$34-37 million
Pac-12	\$354 million	\$29.5 million
ACC	\$465 million	\$29.5 million
Annual Revenues	\$2.75 billion	

There are numerous recruiting websites that produce recruiting news 24-hours a day, 7-days a week. Sports and entertainment networks (e.g., ESPN, NBCSN, and Fox Sports) devote hours of programming prior to the various “National Signing Days.” Two prominent recruiting websites include the “official” *National Letter of Intent* ([nationalletter.org](http://nationalletter.org)), jointly administered by the Collegiate Commissioners Association (CCA) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and *Next College Student Athlete* (NCSA) (<https://www.ncsasports.org>), formerly known as the *National Collegiate Scouting Association*.

Recruiting and signing college athletes is so important that within hours of winning the 2015-16 College Football Playoff (CFP) national championship, Smith (2016) noted University of Alabama head football coach Nick Saban was busy contacting recruits hoping to secure commitments. Coaches, players and fans recognize the importance of recruiting, particularly among the Power-5 sports of football, and men’s and women’s basketball. Future players, as young as 14-years of age, are already on fans’ proverbial radar screens. Head and assistant coaches know full well their livelihood depends on successful recruiting (Wood, 2010). In some cases, college coaches are scorned for recruiting failures as much as on-the-field-or-court subpar performances. Athletic directors and college presidents often field questions from fans and members of the media concerning their coaches’ recruiting efforts. In today’s social media environment, fans react to recruits’ posts as real-time indicators of coaches’ recruiting proficiency or deficiency. Increased year-round attention has resulted in a limited amount of “down time” for everyone involved.

In response, in 2004 the NCAA instituted restrictions on campus visits to, “...end the celebrity atmosphere that [had] developed around the recruiting visit” (Hutton, 2004, para. 5). Despite the heightened focus on college sport recruiting and its importance in a program’s success, little is known about the recruiting process beyond anecdotal accounts and portrayals in movies and television shows (Bennett, 2008). Guided by organizational and institutional theories, this study examines the content of Power-5 conference official visit itineraries and compares findings by gender and sport.

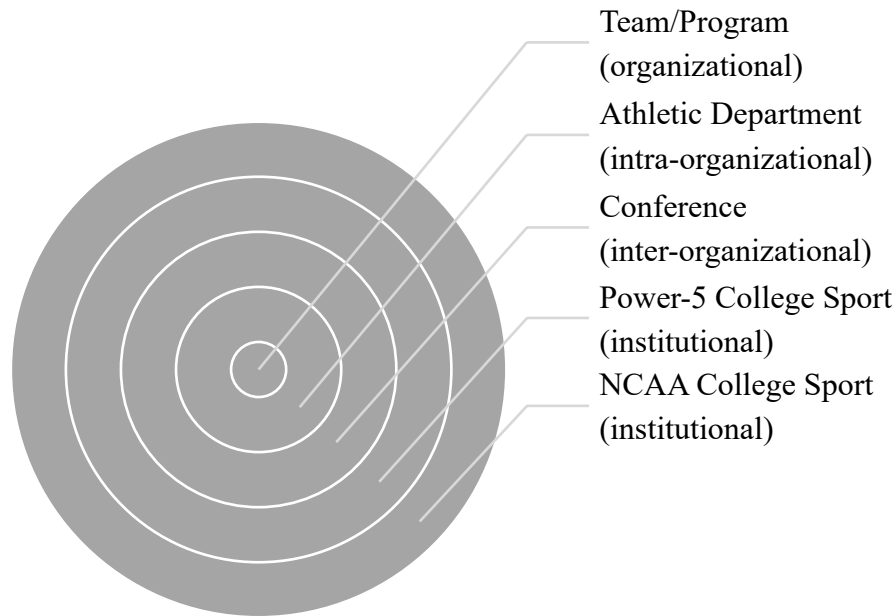
## Theoretical Frameworks

### *Organizational Culture*

NCAA teams, athletic departments, and Power-5 conferences all have an internal set of agreed upon values, which at an individual organizational level Schein (1984) identified as an organization’s culture: basic assumptions that have been invented, discussed or developed to address problems or challenges. After these assumptions have worked well enough to be considered valid, they are taught to new members as “...the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1984, p. 3). These symbolic organizational assumptions and structures rationalize an organization’s stated values and guide organizational members’ practical day-to-day actions. Since values are aspirational, organizations must also develop and pass on to new members cultural templates as guardrails that have worked in the past, and can be relied upon by members as they face present-day challenges.

At Power-5 team, athletic department, and conference levels, there is an interface in which dominant individual organizational cultures coalesce into an overarching dominant institutional logic, which – in the case of NCAA Power-5 college sport – Southall and Nagel (2009) referred to as “jock capitalism.” This institutional structure, which provides stability and

meaning (See Figure 1), did not develop organically but was created – and has been subsequently maintained and supported – through the shared efforts and choices of Power-5 team, athletic department and Power-5 conference members. This organizational/institutional structure is not monolithic and homogenous but rather an arrangement in which constant tension exists and negotiation occurs among and between organizational and institutional members.



*Figure 1.*  
College Sport's Organizational and Institutional Layers.

### *Institutional Theory*

In addition to research utilizing an organizational culture framework, various elements of institutional theory, including: institutionalization, institutional logics, institutional change, and institutional propaganda have been used to examine the macro-dynamics through which large-scale social and economic changes have occurred within the Power-5 college-sport institutional field (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013). Fundamental to any of these processes is a system of institutional values and practices that are "...taken for granted presumably because people are either not consciously aware of, perceive, or question these phenomena" (Woolf et al., 2016, p. 439). As Jepperson (1991) and Woolf et al. (2016) noted, these represented institutional practices are similar to *performance scripts* that institutional members perform almost without thinking. These scripts not only determine acceptable or unacceptable operational means, they also guide the implementation of institutional strategies, routines, and precedents (Southall et al., 2008).

As Meyer and Rowan (1977) discussed, in order to maintain the ceremonial conformity of policies and practices that function as powerful myths and are institutionalized as rationalized concepts of organizational work, organizations adopt formal structures that reflect "...the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities" (p. 341).

These mythological institutional rules tend to buffer formal structures from the uncertainties that arise between formal structures and actual work activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

During official visits, which can last no longer than 48-hours, institutions can pay for a prospect's (and up to four family members) transportation to and from campus, lodging, meals, and entertainment (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.4). Throughout the recruiting process, recruiters perform institutional work, through which they articulate to recruits purported institutional structures within which the recruits will live, work and play once they have been accepted as members of the athletic team. Official visits are presented to recruits as an indication of the lived experiences of current team members. Throughout scripted official visits, recruiters communicate mythological ceremonial facades to recruits.

As Scott (2005) noted, the myriad facets of institutional theory provide a context within which to investigate an institutional field. Institutional actors operate within these "rationalized" systems in pursuit of specified goals. In addition, these models of rationality are cultural systems "...constructed to represent appropriate methods for pursuing [institutional goals] or purposes" (Scott, 2005, p. 5). Consistently, institutional theorists (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Nite et al., 2019; Nite & Washington, 2017; Scott, 2005, Southall et al., 2008) have posited that an institution's norms of rationality play a causal role in the creation and maintenance of formal organizational structures and accepted, taken-for-granted facts, which Friedland and Alford (1991) identified as a central or dominant institutional logic. On a macro level, this logic not only guides the development, evaluation and implementation of strategies, but also informs operational procedures and future innovation (Duncan & Brummett, 1991; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Washington & Ventresca, 2004). An institution's dominant logic shapes how institutional actors engage in coherent, well-understood, and acceptable activities. In this sense, then, institutions become "encoded in actors' stocks of practical knowledge [that] influence[s] how people communicate, enact power, and determine what behaviors to sanction and reward" (Barley & Tolbert, 1997, p. 98). However, these unquestioned facts (e.g., an institution's logic) may be subject to ongoing dissonance, or – over time – the institutional field may be disrupted.

### *Dominant Power-5 Institutional Logic*

The dissonance between higher education's espoused educational values and those of Division-I (e.g., Power-5) college athletic departments has been well documented. As far back as 1929 the *Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* contended college sport was being ruined by commercialism and detailed abuses that threatened to corrupt college sport's presumed purpose (Hersch, 1990). For almost as long as college sport has existed, a common criticism has been college and universities have sacrificed their academic credibility in the name of athletic success (Hersch, 1990). This value incongruence, as Schroeder (2010) noted, is the result of an institutional field in which athletic departments are – in many ways – independent institutional entities that often develop independent values that are in conflict with those of the universities in which they are housed.

However, college athletic departments are not monolithic organizations with only one set of departmental values or practices. In addition, the institution of NCAA Power-5 college sport is not homogeneous. Numerous investigations (Padilla & Baumer, 1994; Putler & Wolfe, 1999; Santomier et al., 1980; Schroeder, 2010; Southall et al., 2005) have found competing athletic department priorities, with Southall et al. (2005) and Schroeder (2010) uncovering significant

differences between the most crystalized values of Division-I and Power-5 revenue and non-revenue, and male and female sport programs, with the most pronounced differences being between football and men's basketball and all other sports. Within Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Power-5 Conference athletic departments, male revenue-sports constitute a subculture that values winning above almost anything else and feels constrained by many NCAA bylaws (Santomier et al., 1980; Southall et al., 2005). Tellingly, Martin (1992) noted members who feel disconnected from espoused core organizational values either develop a counterculture and engage in organizational deviance or adopt a competing institutional logic that replaces the previously dominant one.

In 1987, Sack developed a college-sport matrix that delineated the various levels of professionalism and commercialism that exist in the institutional field of NCAA college sport. He contended that college sport was to varying degrees both professional and amateur, as well as commercialized and non-commercialized. The various NCAA divisions and conferences epitomized these differentiations (See Figure 2). Within this identified institutional field, there is strong evidence that over the past 50 years a commercialized, revenue-seeking institutional logic has become dominant within Power-5 college sport (Southall & Nagel, 2008; Southall et al., 2008; Southall et al., 2009; Southall et al., 2014).

	Commercialized	Less Commercialized
Professional Athletic Scholarships	Corporate Model (Power-5, FBS)	"Small Time" Corporate Model (FCS, D-II, D-III)
Amateur No Athletic Scholarships	Ivy Model (Ivy League)	Amateur Model (D-III)

Figure 2.

Typology of College Athletic Conferences/Divisions (Sack, 1987).

### *Institutional Work*

The creation, maintenance and disruption of an institution's dominant logic does not occur in isolation but is the result of – and reflects – the lived experiences of organizational and institutional actors. Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca (2011) describe this process as *institutional work*, which occurs within existing institutional structures, while simultaneously producing, reproducing, and transforming the institution. Institutional work offers a framework within which institutional actors live, work, and play, and which delineates their roles, relationships, resources, and routines (Lawrence et al., 2011).

The concept of institutional work moves beyond the static view that embedded institutional norms, structures and logics reproduce regardless of praxis (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and recognizes that influential institutional leaders often actively

create, maintain, disrupt and recreate institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Nite & Washington, 2017).

An example of a leader's institutional disruption and recreation of an institution's logic through the introduction, dissemination, and insertion of a performance script into an institution's consciousness was Myles Brand's (former NCAA President) institutional work redefining amateurism as *The Collegiate Model of Athletics*, which isolated the concept of amateurism to college athletes while allowing rampant commercialism and maximization of revenue-producing opportunities (NCAA, 2010). As Southall & Staurowsky (2013) noted, Brand wanted to maintain the collegiate model by engaging in institutional work that legitimized college athletes' exclusion from college sport's jock capitalism.

Almost 10-years later, this institutional script (i.e., the collegiate model) has gained so much traction within the institutional field of NCAA Power-5 college sport that on October 29, 2019, when the NCAA national office disseminated a press release outlining a "ground-breaking" shift in policy toward players' use of their own name, image and likeness, the collegiate-model institutional script was utilized as a delimiting maintenance tool. The press release positioned the NCAA as supporting college athletes' rights and embracing "...change to provide the best possible experience for college athletes" (NCAA, 2019a, para. 1). However, the release's lede still articulated a commercial institutional logic that restricted college athletes' right to benefit from the use of their name, image and likeness, since any monetization had to occur within the NCAA's collegiate model (NCAA, 2019a, para. 1). What is left unsaid is that the collegiate model (as embodied in NCAA bylaws) precludes college athletes from receiving: "Any direct or indirect salary, gratuity or comparable compensation" (NCAA, 2019b, Bylaw 12.1.2.1.1.). The use of this script is consistent with the theory of institutional work, since institutional actors who benefit from an institutional script tend to work to maintain their favorable positions (Nite & Washington, 2017).

Within NCAA Power-5 college sport (football and men's basketball in particular) recruiting is impacted by technical forces that shape the "core" functions (e.g., work units, coordinated arrangements and duties of recruiters), as well as institutional forces that reflect more peripheral structures (e.g., managerial and governance systems imposed by the NCAA governance structure) (Scott, 2005). Within Power-5 college sport recruiting, some institutional requirements (e.g., NCAA recruiting-related bylaws) are strongly backed by authoritative agents or effective surveillance systems and sanctions (e.g., NCAA, conference, and/or athletic department compliance offices). Recruiters' responses to such forces will vary, depending on which elements are predominant: external controls (e.g., surveillance and sanctions) or internalized processes that rely on organizational actors holding deeply set beliefs and assumptions (Scott, 2005). External controls – in the absence of deeply set beliefs – often result in strategic deviant responses (e.g., bending, breaking or ignoring imposed rules) (Santomier et al., 1980; Southall et al., 2005).

This exploratory study drew upon institutional theory and, specifically, institutional work to examine official recruiting visits as examples of institutional maintenance work, since although institutions are considered to be enduring entities, organizational actors must still "work" to maintain and communicate institutional practices to internal and external constituencies. Specifically, if one of a college-sport recruiter's tasks is communicating a team's values to recruits, an official visit communicates to prospective members how institutional members communicate, enact power, and determine what behaviors will be sanctioned or rewarded (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). An official visit's unquestioned, taken-for-granted "facts"

reflect particular courses of action developed into performance scripts (i.e., official visit itineraries), which introduce recruits to a team's institutional practices (Jepperson, 1991; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Woolf, et al., 2016).

An important element of an official recruiting visit is determining whether recruits "fit in." Consistent with Woolf et al. (2016), one of a recruiter's major functions is developing a structure within which recruits are socialized into existing institutional practices. The maintenance of existent institutional norms depends on recruits being exposed to and coming to embrace and internalize a team's espoused values.

## Research Context

In official National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) parlance, recruiting is "...any solicitation of a prospective student-athlete<sup>1</sup> (PSA) or a PSA's relatives...by an institutional staff member or by a representative of the institution's athletics interests for the purpose of securing the PSA's enrollment and ultimate participation in the institution's intercollegiate athletics program" (NCAA, 2017 Bylaw 13.02.14). While a football or men's basketball program's success (e.g., wins, players "turning pro") is a key factor in many player decisions, visiting campus is an important opportunity for a program to sell itself, and players to find out if they are comfortable with the coaches and other players (Anderson, 2012; Lawrence & Kaburakis, 2008; Letawsky et al., 2003). Power-5 prospects may take five official visits during their senior year but can take no more than one to any individual institution (NCAA, 2017 Bylaw 13.6.2.1; Bylaw 13.6.2.2.1.3).<sup>2</sup>

Broadly, Bylaw 13 of the NCAA D-I Manual outlines recruiting guidelines. There are specific policies related to transportation (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.5), lodging (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.6), entertainment (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.7), complimentary admissions to athletic events (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.7.2), meals (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.7.7), and cash disbursement to student host(s) to cover costs for entertainment (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.7.5) while PSA's and their family are on an official visit. Other than the NCAA Eligibility Center clearing a PSA to take an official visit, there are no bylaws specifically mandating academic-related discussions during an official visit.

Given an official visit's importance and relatively short (48-hour) duration, planning is extremely detailed, with time often allocated down to the minute (Sallee, 2014). In most instances, programs prepare a written itinerary and provide it to a recruit's travel party and current athlete host(s). According to the NCAA's regulatory framework, official-visit activities must be comparable to what a "regular student" might experience on a campus visit, or at least commensurate with what is regularly provided to athletes at that institution (NCAA, 2017, Bylaws 13.6.6; 13.6.7.7). In addition, the NCAA wants official visits to mimic what a college athlete should expect upon enrollment at an institution. Extant research has found campus visits aid in prospective students' understanding of "the nature of college...[which] may be important to his or her future success...[and being] academically [prepared] for college admission"

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<sup>1</sup> Consistent with Staurowsky and Sack (2005), in this manuscript the term "student-athlete" refers to a specific use in an NCAA bylaw (e.g., "prospective student-athlete"). In all other circumstances, the term "college-athlete" is used.

<sup>2</sup> Football recruits may begin taking official visits April 1st of their junior year. Men's basketball recruits may take five official visits during their junior year and an additional five during their senior year.



(Radcliffe & Bos, 2013, p. 137). Lytle (2012) notes college campus visits are intended to provide prospective college students with brief – but realistic – introductions to campus life, which will assist in students' college-selection process.

Another purpose of any college visit is to introduce prospective students to the concept of time management. It is customary for a full-time college student to be enrolled in four-to-five courses, which meet for 12-15 hours per week (Pelletier & Laska, 2012). In addition, it is recommended college students devote two-three hours per week to outside study time for each hour of class time (Nelson, 2010). This equates to 30-45 hours per week for a full-time student enrolled in four-to-five classes. The NCAA (2016) contends college athletes spend 38.5 hours (23% of their week) on academics. According to the same NCAA report, college athletes spend an average of 34 hours (20%) on athletics (NCAA, 2016).

For traditional prospective SEC students (i.e., students not participating in collegiate athletics), campus tours are standardized across the 14-member conference. Each SEC university has an admissions page where students can register for a campus tour. While the campus tour is complementary, expenses related to travel, lodging, dining, and even parking are the responsibility of individual potential students and their family. According to admissions office websites, these campus tours usually last 2-4 hours and consist of an academic information session, and tours of the central part of campus, libraries, dorm rooms/student housing, dining halls/food courts, and recreation facilities. In addition, many individual colleges and departments within SEC universities also offer orientations for admitted students that function as an extension of the university campus visit. These orientations, while specialized to a specific academic discipline, do not include reimbursement for travel, lodging, dining, or parking.

Within this context, this study documented and categorized official-visit itineraries as examples of institutional work performed by members of SEC teams and athletic departments. The following section details the sampling frame, as well as the data-collection and coding procedures.

## **Methodology**

### *Sampling Frame*

The Southeastern Conference (SEC) was chosen as this study's sampling frame due to the conference's position as the premier conference in collegiate athletics (Renkel, 2017). The SEC consists of 14 member institutions and offers a total of 21 sports: 9 men's and 12 women's. While offering the least number of sports among Power-5 conferences, the SEC spends more money on recruiting than any other conference (Ching, 2018). In terms of a financial commitment, the SEC places more of an emphasis on recruiting than any other Power-5 conference. Notably, in 2017-2018, SEC athletic departments had four of the top-five and eight of the top-20 Power-5 recruiting budgets (Ching, 2018).

### *Procedure*

Emails were sent to a designated member of each varsity sport coaching/recruiting staff within each SEC athletic department, requesting official visit itineraries from the year 2018 or 2019. For each institution and team, at least three attempts were made. No responses or acknowledgments of these initial communication attempts (across any sport or program)

occurred. After achieving no success in obtaining information via email solicitations, acquiring data through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests was deemed the most efficient strategy, since 13 out of the 14 SEC member universities are public universities (Vanderbilt University is the only private university). Eight athletic departments responded to the FOIA request by providing standard official visit itineraries across multiple sports from 2018 or 2019. Two athletic departments requested payment to complete the FOIA request and three athletic departments provided no response. It should be noted that the three athletic departments that did not respond operate in states that require residency requirements to fulfill FOIA requests.

### *Data*

A “typical” itinerary consisted of one-to-two pages of chronologically-organized activities with parenthetical location and transportation information. All itineraries presented a detailed schedule outlining official-visit activities. Contact information for coaches, support staff, and athlete hosts was also noted on itineraries.

Within a thematic framework containing three college-athlete roles: 1) athletic, 2) academic, and 3) social (Adler & Adler, 1987; 1991), official-visit itinerary elements were coded and duration of activities (in minutes) calculated. The NCAA classification of recruits as “prospective student-athletes,” purportedly acknowledges the primacy of recruits’ academic role. In addition, acknowledging the importance of allowing recruits to socialize and be entertained NCAA regulations: a) permit travel of up to 30 miles from an institution’s primary campus for the purpose of entertainment while a PSA is on an official visit (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.7.1); b) allow institutions to spend up to \$40 per day, per PSA on activities specifically related to entertainment (NCAA, 2017, Bylaw 13.6.7.8); and c) permit a student host, or a member of an athletic team at the institution, to be provided with \$40 per day for the purpose of entertaining a PSA during an official visit (NCAA, 2017 Bylaw 13.6.7.5).

Individual activities were coded by a team of researchers trained in thematic and discourse analysis. An athletic activity was any activity specifically related to potential sport participation (i.e., meeting with an athletic coach, observing practice or an athletic contest, trying on athletic equipment, and/or taking a tour of a strength and conditioning facility). An academic activity was specifically related to academics (i.e., meeting with a faculty member, observing a college class, and/or taking a tour of an academic facility). Examples of social activities were going to the movies with a host(s), attending a football game<sup>3</sup>, and/or sharing a meal with current team members. It should be noted that across all sports, social activities almost exclusively took place in the evening or at night. Table 3 provides representative coding examples.

The number of times a themed-activity was listed, as well as the amount of time dedicated to that activity during a 48-hour official visit was calculated. By summarizing listed instances and minutes dedicated, the amount of institutional work devoted to each theme/role could be determined. The twenty-one individual sports were initially categorized by gender. In addition, based on Sack’s (1987) and Southall and Staurowsky’s (2013) typologies, sports were separated into three categories related to revenue generation: a) *non-revenue* sports, b) *revenue*

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<sup>3</sup> For non-football PSA’s, attending a football game was coded as a “social” activity. However, a football PSA attending a football game was coded as an “athletic” activity, since a football player would not view the game as a social event but as an athletic event. Therefore, when PSAs attended a sporting event in which they would participate as a college athlete, attending that game was coded as an athletic activity.

sports, and c) *profit* sports. The non-revenue sports in this study typically generate less than \$100,000 of revenue and included: beach volleyball, equestrian, men's and women's golf, gymnastics, lacrosse, rifle, soccer, softball, men's and women's swimming & diving, men's and women's tennis, men's and women's track & field, volleyball, and wrestling. Revenue sports were baseball and women's basketball, teams that may generate substantial revenue but still have expenses that exceed revenues. Power-5 profit sports are football and men's basketball, teams that generate more revenue than expenses and fund revenue and non-revenue sports' operations. For some analyses, MANOVA tests compared variables across a sample of eight institutions, allowed inferences across the 14 SEC members.

Table 3  
*Codes Examples & Themes*

Code Example	Theme
Equipment Sizing with Head Equipment Manager [name omitted] & Photo Shoot with Sports Information Director [name omitted]	Athletic
Meet with Staff to review Strength and Conditioning plan	Athletic
Observe team shoot-around	Athletic
College of Business. Meeting w/ Professor	Academic
Attend History Class with [name omitted]	Academic
Tour the Academic Center with Academic Advisor, Staff	Academic
Game night with the women's team!	Social
Breakfast at the Hotel with Girls and their families	Social
Walk to [football game]; Recruits on Field [for pregame]	Social

*\*Note.* Codes represent examples taken verbatim from itineraries. Bracketed items indicate names of individuals, universities, or facilities that have been removed to maintain anonymity.

## Findings

In total, 76 official visit itineraries from 21 sports from 2018 or 2019 were collected. Thirty-three itineraries (43%) were from men's sports and 43 (57%) were from women's sports. All itineraries allotted eight-hours each night for sleeping. Sixty-seven of 76 (88%) itineraries listed the official visit's date/day. Fifty-two (78%) official visits took place over the course of a weekend (Friday through Sunday). Baseball ( $n = 4$ ), football ( $n = 7$ ), and gymnastics ( $n = 4$ ) were the only sports to have, exclusively, weekend official visits.

Only 17 of 75<sup>4</sup> (23%) recruits stayed in dormitories with current college athletes during their official visit. Of the 17 who stayed in dormitories, all were from non-revenue sports: (i.e., equestrian, women's golf, gymnastics, rifle, softball, men's swimming & diving, women's

<sup>4</sup> One women's volleyball itinerary did not report where PSA stayed during the official visit.

swimming & diving, women's tennis, women's volleyball, and wrestling), and only three were male athletes (2 swimming & diving, 1 wrestling). Fifty-seven of 75 recruits (76%) stayed in a hotel during their official visit. While 12 itineraries did not specifically name the hotel, 45 recruits stayed at an identified hotel. According to Google's hotel "class-rating" measure (recognized by *Forbes* as a leading hotel review site [Elliott, 2018]), 14 recruits (31%) stayed at a 4-star hotel<sup>5</sup>, 25 recruits (56%) stayed in a 3-star hotel<sup>6</sup>, and six recruits (13%) stayed in a 2-star hotel<sup>7</sup>. It should be noted that within individual athletic departments, many teams utilized the same hotel for official visits. Of the 14 recruits who stayed at a 4-star hotel, eight were recruits of the same school and represented six different sports<sup>8</sup>. Overall, recruits tended to stay at the highest rated hotel in closest proximity to campus.

Overall, *social* activities were the most prevalent ( $M_{Social} = 8.2$ ) and had the most time allocated ( $M_{Social} = 10$  hours and 35 minutes [10:35]). *Athletic* activities ( $M_{Athletics} = 4.1$ ) were less prevalent and had less time allotted ( $M_{Athletics} = 4:58$ ). *Academic* activities were the least prevalent ( $M_{Academics} = 1.2$ ) ( $M_{Academics} = 1:06$ ).

### Individual Sports

Table 4 summarizes itinerary content by sport. When individual sports were examined, several noteworthy findings emerge. Gymnastics ( $M_{Social} = 14:35$ ), football ( $M_{Social} = 14:23$ ), and men's swimming & diving ( $M_{Social} = 13:20$ ) dedicated the most time to social activities, while rifle ( $M_{Social} = 5:30$ ), women's volleyball ( $M_{Social} = 5:00$ ), and women's lacrosse ( $M_{Social} = 4:25$ ) dedicated the least. Rifle ( $M_{Athletics} = 11:00$ ), women's swimming & diving ( $M_{Athletics} = 7:09$ ), and men's basketball ( $M_{Athletics} = 7:06$ ) dedicated the most time to athletics, while softball ( $M_{Athletics} = 3:08$ ), women's golf ( $M_{Athletics} = 2:26$ ), and women's lacrosse ( $M_{Athletics} = 0:00$ ) dedicated the least. Equestrian ( $M_{Academics} = 6:35$ ), rifle ( $M_{Academics} = 6:30$ ), and women's lacrosse ( $M_{Academics} = 2:15$ ) dedicated the most time to academics but each sport had only a single itinerary. The gender-combined sports (i.e., women's [ $M_{Academics} = 2:03$ ] and men's track & field [ $M_{Academics} = 2:00$ ]; women's [ $M_{Academics} = 1:24$ ] and men's swimming & diving [ $M_{Academics} = 1:26$ ]) dedicated the most time to academics, while women's volleyball ( $M_{Academics} = :15$ ), baseball ( $M_{Academics} = :15$ ), and women's soccer ( $M_{Academics} = :24$ ) dedicated the least.

### Gender

Table 5 highlights the gathered data in the context of gender differentiations. While men's sports dedicated 1:42 more time to social activities, time dedicated to athletics was roughly equivalent for men's ( $M_{Athletics} = 4:57$ ) and women's ( $M_{Athletics} = 4:59$ ) sports. However, the number of athletic activities was greater in men's ( $M_{Athletics} = 4.7$ ) than women's sports ( $M_{Athletics} = 3.7$ ). Men's and women's itineraries contained roughly the same number of academic

<sup>5</sup> Baseball, men's basketball (2), women's basketball, football (3), gymnastics, soccer, men's tennis, men's track & field, women's track & field (3).

<sup>6</sup> Baseball, women's basketball (2), football (2), men's golf, women's golf (2), gymnastics, lacrosse, soccer (2), softball (3), men's swimming & diving, women's swimming & diving (2), men's tennis, women's tennis (2), men's track & field (3), women's track & field.

<sup>7</sup> Baseball, men's golf (2), soccer, men's track & field, volleyball.

<sup>8</sup> Baseball, football, soccer, men's tennis, men's and women's track & field.

activities ( $M_{Academics} = 1.1$  and  $1.2$ ) but women's sports dedicated 24 minutes more to academics. In addition, multivariate analyses for gender indicated that official visits for male sports dedicated significantly less time to academics than official visits for female sports ( $P < .01$ ).

Table 4  
*Sport Findings*

ITEM	<i>n</i>	ATH. ITEMS	ATH. TIME	ACA. ITEMS	ACA. TIME	SOC. ITEMS	SOC. TIME
Equestrian	1	5.0	6:05	4.0	6:35	8.0	12:55
Rifle	1	4.0	11:00	2.0	6:30	6.0	5:30
Lacrosse	1	1.0	0:00	1.0	2:15	9.0	4:25
	5	4.0	6:50	1.8	2:03	9.8	10:32
Track & Field (Women's)							
Track & Field (Men's)	5	4.4	5:57	1.8	2:00	8.6	12:28
Swimming & Diving (Men's)	3	5.7	6:06	1.3	1:26	6.7	13:20
Swimming & Diving (Women's)	6	5.5	7:09	1.5	1:24	8.3	10:59
Golf (Women's)	4	2.0	2:26	1.0	1:17	7.5	8:38
Gymnastics	3	3.7	5:50	1.0	1:05	8.3	14:35
Football	7	6.6	3:59	1.7	0:58	11.4	14:23
	3	4.3	4:10	1.3	0:51	11.7	10:48
Basketball (Women's)							
Tennis (Women's)	4	3.3	5:35	1.3	0:51	7.3	8:48
Softball	5	2.6	3:08	1.2	0:46	8.8	10:37
Tennis (Men's)	4	4.3	4:33	1.0	0:45	7.8	8:05
Wrestling	1	4.0	4:15	1.0	0:30	10.0	11:25
Basketball (Men's)	4	4.8	7:06	0.8	0:26	7.8	8:18
Golf (Men's)	4	2.5	3:41	0.5	0:26	6.5	11:37
Soccer	5	4.8	4:41	0.6	0:24	8.6	10:55
Baseball	5	3.8	4:22	0.4	0:15	6.2	11:00
Volleyball	4	3.5	3:18	0.8	0:15	5.0	5:00
Beach Volleyball	1	2.0	6:00	0.0	0:00	4.0	8:30

\*Note. Figures represent calculated averages in cases where  $n > 1$ .

Table 5  
*Summary Statistics*

GROUP	<i>n</i>	ATH. ITEMS	ATH. TIME	ACA. ITEMS	ACA. TIME	SOC. ITEMS	SOC. TIME
All Sports	76	4.1	4:58	1.2	1:06	8.2	10:35
Men's Sports	33	4.7	4:57	1.1	0:53	8.2	11:33
Women's Sports	43	3.7	4:59	1.2	1:17	8.2	9:51
Profit Sports	11	5.9	5:07	1.4	0:46	10.1	12:10
Revenue Sports	8	4.0	4:17	0.8	0:28	8.3	10:55
Male Non-Revenue Sports	17	4.1	5:01	1.2	1:09	7.6	11:19
Female Non-Revenue Sports	40	3.7	5:03	1.2	1:19	7.9	10:01

*\*Figures represent calculated averages*

### *Non-Revenue Sports*

The average amount of time devoted to social activities during non-revenue sport visits was ( $M_{Social} = 10:23$ ). The average number of athletic activities among non-revenue sports was ( $M_{Athletics} = 3.8$ ), spanning ( $M_{Athletics} = 5:02$ ). The average number of athletic and academic activities, as well as time allotted to athletic and academic activities, was nearly identical for male and female non-revenue sports. However, on average, male non-revenue sports dedicated more time ( $M_{Social} = 1:18$ ) to social activities than female non-revenue sports. The average number of academic activities was ( $M_{Academics} = 1.2$ ), with only 1:16 during an official visit devoted to academics.

### *Revenue Sports*

Revenue sport (baseball [ $n = 5$ ] and women's basketball [ $n = 3$ ]) itineraries contained an average of 8.3 social activities with (on average) 10:55 dedicated to social activities. The average number ( $M_{Athletics} = 4.0$ ) and time ( $M_{Athletics} = 4:17$ ) of revenue-sport athletic activities was lower

than both non-revenue and profit sports. Across all groups, academic activities were the least emphasized among revenue sports in both number of activities ( $M_{Academics} = 0.8$ ) and time ( $M_{Academics} = 0:28$ ). Multivariate analyses for sport groupings indicated that revenue sports dedicated significantly less time to academics than non-revenue sports ( $P < .05$ ).

### *Profit Sports*

Football ( $n = 7$ ) and men's basketball ( $n = 4$ ) itineraries contained an average of 10.1 social activities that comprised 12:10 of a visit. Profit sports dedicated ( $M_{Social} = 1:49$ ) more to social activities than revenue or non-revenue sports, and averaged 2.1 more athletics activities and dedicated :10 more to athletics. While football and men's basketball averaged more academic activities ( $M_{Academics} = 1.4$ ), they dedicated ( $M_{Academics} = :29$ ) less time to academics. Multivariate analyses for sport groupings indicated football and men's basketball (i.e., "profit" sports) itineraries involved significantly more social ( $P < .075$ ) and athletic ( $P < .01$ ) activities than revenue sports and non-revenue sports.

## Discussion

Within the Southeastern Conference, official visit itineraries function as performance scripts, in which athletic departments' institutional practices are performed and conveyed to PSAs. In addition, for recruiters and relevant stakeholders, Power-5 institutional scripts establish routines, communicate acceptable or unacceptable levels of operational resource allocation and create precedent for changes to strategic initiatives. While there is evidence of a dominant institutional recruiting logic in the SEC, within athletic departments profit-sport official visit itineraries are similar in both content and emphasis, while also significantly different from revenue and non-revenue sport itineraries. These findings are not surprising, given that the SEC has been described as a "copy-cat" conference, in which each program (e.g., team and athletic department) is well aware of what other programs are doing. Teams within each category (i.e., male/female, non-revenue/revenue/profit) replicated official visit itineraries, which offers evidence of shared institutional work within the Southeastern Conference.

Consistent with previous research (Southall et al., 2005; Schroeder, 2010), while there were no significant differences between itineraries based upon athletic department, this study did find significant differences between profit and non-revenue sport itineraries. Clearly, this study's findings offer evidence of subcultures within athletic departments, as well as the existence of a dominant institutional logic that recognizes the ascendancy of Power-5 football (and to a lesser extent men's basketball) within the institutional field of NCAA Power-5 college sport.

This conference-level dominant logic is not surprising, since less-successful departments and teams likely model their strategies and performance scripts after those of more successful (in terms of wins and losses) programs. Given that many SEC coaches have coached at other SEC schools (Levine, 2015), such mimicry or groupthink is to be expected. In 2015, following their third national championship in five seasons, University of Alabama football staff complained other football programs were copying many of their recruiting materials (Kingsbury, 2015). This study's findings offer evidence recruiters follow similar "game plans" and engage in similar institutional work (Johnson, 2018).

Within the SEC institutional field, official visits introduce recruits to athletic departments' organizational values and the overall institutional practices of SEC members.

Activities undertaken during official visits send subtle and not-so-subtle messages about what is important to both recruiters and recruits. Tailoring official visits to what recruits' value sends distinct signals that may be counter to espoused university narratives (e.g., The importance of educational opportunities.). According to the Director of On-Campus Recruiting for a football program in the SEC, a majority of official visits begin on Fridays, since college football games are, traditionally, held on Saturdays. One of the most important activities for all recruits (but especially for football recruits) is an SEC football game (SEC Source 1, personal communication, September 18, 2019).

In addition to SEC football games being almost exclusively Saturday events, many SEC sports feature competitions that occur over the course of a weekend (e.g., SEC baseball and softball series typically occur on Fridays, Saturdays, & Sundays and gymnastics meets are often held on Friday nights). Given these parameters, it is reasonable that non-revenue recruiting staffs would schedule official visits to coincide with home football games. According to an SEC football director of player personnel, while there is some flexibility (based off individual recruits' requests), official visits tend to follow a football-centric schedule (SEC Source 2, personal communication, September 19, 2019).

Recruits tend to not determine on which specific days an official visit will take place. In addition, official visits most often take place on weekends, so recruits miss as little school as possible. However, departments also strategically schedule official visits on weekends, so recruits can experience an SEC gameday environment. Saturday nights are tailor-made opportunities for current athletes to socialize with recruits, creating an expectation of a college athlete's social life. If official visits began in the middle of the week (e.g., Wednesday/Thursday), recruits would be exposed to a much different college experience with a balance of academic/social/athletic activities. While athletic and social official visit activities are important, weekend recruiting trips limit a recruit's exposure to academic activities (e.g., classes, labs, lectures, libraries) and the academic rigors of college life.

Official visits are formal institutional structures that re-present, as Meyer and Rowan (1977) stated, "...the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities" (p. 341). Power-5 official visits present a mythological portrait of big-time college sport, suppressing and minimizing the academic demands of attending what is – many times – a rigorous academic institution.

During a weekend official visit, recruits experience a campus environment markedly different from a mid-week one. In many ways, official visits are ceremonial façades through which recruiters present a scripted mythological college experience communicating to recruits the importance of social and athletic activities. However, this scripted experience bears little resemblance to the reality of college. While "academics" forms the foundation of the NCAA grant-in-aid system official visits minimize academics while emphasizing social and athletics activities over academics.

Consistent with previous research regarding identified subcultures within Power-5 athletic departments, this study identified competing athletic department priorities (Padilla & Baumer, 1994; Putler & Wolfe, 1999; Santomier et al., 1980; Schroeder, 2010; Southall et al., 2005). While – in order to satisfy NCAA recruiting mandates – all sports adhere to a similar official visit script template, observable differences offer evidence of subcultures within athletic departments. Specifically, revenue and profit sports dedicated more activities to social activities than any other component. In addition, profit sports clearly emphasized athletic and social components, while minimizing academics. While existence is not causation, such minimization



is problematic given that Power-5 football and men's basketball players graduate at significantly lower rates than full-time male students (Southall et al., 2015), consume alcohol at higher rates than both the general student body and female athletes (Leichliter et al., 1998; Olthuis et al., 2011), and become engulfed in their glorified athlete role (Adler & Adler, 1987, 1989, 1991; Kidd et al., 2018). Clearly, this study's itineraries are not consistent with the totality of a college athlete's experience. Identifying this emphasis on athletic and social components during official visits should inform future research into the relationship of institutional work (i.e., recruiting) to athletic role engulfment of both Power-5 profit athletes and recruiters. One of the purported tasks of a college recruiter is communicating institutional and departmental values, and appropriate and/or acceptable actions and behaviors to recruits. However, a recruiter's ultimate goal is getting a recruit to sign a *National Letter of Intent* (NLI) and grant-in-aid agreement. Therefore, the emphasis placed on specific components of an official visit reflect the actions Power-5 recruiters deem appropriate to achieve these goals.

A variety of future studies should be conducted in this area. Itineraries in other Power-5 and Group of 5 conferences should be analyzed to determine the extent to which there is an institutional recruiting logic that permeates Power-5 sports and Power-5 profit sports in particular. In addition to content analyses, recruits across a variety of sports should be interviewed to determine specific activities that occurred during their official visits. To determine the degree to which Power-5 recruiters' institutional work is consciously designed to reinforce and support recruits' athletic role engulfment, it is suggested in-depth semi-structured interviews with Power-5 sport recruiters also be undertaken. While such interviews will likely be difficult to arrange, such candid discussions are a necessary adjunct to this study.

As Power-5 college athletes continue to be engulfed in their athletic roles (Kidd et al., 2018), the institutional work of recruiting college athletes reflects the production, reproduction and support for a dominant SEC institutional logic, in which SEC football is the focal point. As Lawrence (2011) noted, institutional workers continually and actively determine and transform the institutional structures within which they live, work, and play. The focus of SEC recruiters on constructing and facilitating athletic and social activities during official visits communicates to recruits the pre-eminent importance of their athletic and social roles. If recruiters are – in fact – cognizant of recruits' role engulfed status, such construction helps meet the primary goal of securing a recruit's commitment. As any good salesperson does, recruiters read and play to recruits' wants, need and desires.

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