



Institutions can manage the conflicts inherent in their academic and athletic identities through seeking synergies.

Organizational Complexity: The Athletics Department and the University

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Universities have long struggled with balancing their core instruction, research, and service missions with the win-at-all-costs mentality of spectator sports. Indeed, much has been written about the athletics-academic debate. Arguments abound that athletics distract institutions and drain resources from their appropriate educational and research purposes (DiBiaggio, Crowley, Hitt, and Webb, 2006; Duderstadt, 2003; Gerdy, 2006; Sperber, 2000). In addition, spectator sports within the most prominent athletics programs degrade admission standards and exploit athletes for their commercial value (Bowen and Levin, 2003; Shulman and Bowen, 2002; Sperber, 2000). Athletics have been described as a “malignancy on campus” (Odenkirk, 1981) and the “beer and circus” of the academy (Sperber, 2000). In contrast, as Suggs discusses in Chapter 1, spectator sports can amount to a “front porch” to an institution, making it accessible to alumni and the community, and engender “campus spirit,” making a university more attractive to students. There are also arguments that athletics build character and develop important life skills among those competing (Shulman and Bowen, 2002).

Unfortunately, the athletics-academic debate often masks the complexity of characterizing athletics programs as either educationally valuable

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initiatives or belonging in business and the entertainment industry. My purpose is to move beyond the either-or conceptualization and offer a more nuanced and inclusive both-and perspective of athletics programs as both academic and business organizations. I am interested in exploring the dual organizational identities of institutions and the chronic conflict between academic values and commercial pressures. The latter is associated with spectator sports but certainly is increasingly applicable to institutions in fulfilling their instructional, research, and service missions. As discussed in Chapter 7, there are regular calls for reform to resolve such discord, with few success stories. Periods of reform of sports, like episodes of academic reform in higher education, have “produced many manifestos but few enduring results” (Kerr, 2001, p. viii). My premise is that understanding the tensions that persist between academe and athletics as an identity conflict is vital in crafting effective reform agendas. I suggest that critics have not taken sufficient account of the culture in athletics and commercial pressures associated with the enterprise, and thus solutions are not realistic or even relevant. (Those involved in spectator sports also commonly fail to fully understand traditional educational values within the broader university.) Theory and research on organizational identity—and on hybrid organizational identities in particular—suggest a new and provocative lens for understanding and managing this persistent conflict.

Organizational Identity and Hybrid Identity

Broadly speaking, an *identity question*, on an individual level, focuses on those features that are the essence of each individual and make each person unique. Identity enables people to make sense of their world and determine who they are in everyday life (Weick, 1995). Similarly, identity exists at the organizational level and answers the question, “Who are we as an organization?” (Albert and Whetten, 1985). An organization’s identity is ultimately defined as the set of characteristics that members claim are central (that is, at the heart of), enduring (stable over time), and distinguishing (distinctive; Albert and Whetten, 1985). Organizations can also develop a dualistic identity, becoming a hybrid, in effect, whenever members of an organization have multiple answers to the question “Who are we as an organization?” (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Albert, Godfrey, and Whetten, 1999). With athletics, universities are hybrid identity organizations, operating simultaneously as an entertainment business in one division and a research, instruction, and service enterprise in another. There is overlap between the two; athletics recognize educational purposes and institutions are commercializing. Also, within athletics, academic values are more prominent than pressure toward professionalism.

Just as religious universities must balance faith-based values with research objectivity, athletics programs operate as a business with educational values associated with it, as opposed to being driven by academic values with

the recognition of the need for some attention to business concerns. The central and enduring characteristics of all businesses are linked to profit maximization and return on investment, with money both a means to success as an input and a measure of it as an output. Such concerns have been associated with intercollegiate athletics since its beginnings; the rowing competition between Harvard and Yale in 1852 was sponsored by a railroad that wanted to promote a new resort, and gambling on the outcome was a significant aspect of the event (Chu, 1989). By the early twentieth century, athletics continued to commercialize and professionalize, leading to the addition of coaches and administrators, and finally resembling their present form (Thelin, 2004; Lapchick and Slaughter, 1989). Meanwhile, presidents were interested in capitalizing on the popularity of sports such as football to generate revenue and media interest to gain publicity, completing the shift from student activity to spectator sport (Thelin, 2004; Duderstadt, 2003). Media involvement continues to drive athletics, with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reporting annual revenues of more than \$500 million, generated primarily through selling broadcasting and merchandising rights associated with the annual men's basketball tournament (NCAA, 2008). There are similarly impressive deals involving the major conferences in football. Institutions have also been aggressive in generating revenue through athletics, especially through ticket sales, fundraising, and advertising rights, and they have made massive investments in infrastructure and offering successful coach compensation packages that are competitive with professional leagues (Weiberg, 2001).

Intercollegiate athletics also have an educational identity. Spectator sports generally reside within research universities whose primary teaching, research, and service functions are "largely predicated on a single qualification—the possession of expert specialized, theoretical knowledge" (Geiger, 2004, p. 7). Athletes must be students in good standing and are technically amateurs, and the athletic department must be embedded within the institution and under its control, even if external constituents do not always see these connections with the broader university and its educational purposes (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Brand, 2006). Athletics also draw on academic successes and prestige in differentiating their program from others; but still, of course, they focus primarily on the wins and losses that are the other aspect of the core business. Such distinctiveness is important in developing strategy within any organization. Positioning the institution is about establishing competitive advantage and aligning activities and functions through underscoring what is distinctive about it (Porter, 1996). Finally, both athletics and the broader university draw on institutional culture, in substance and in form. Many of these cultural forms are grounded in athletics, symbols, language, narratives, and practices unique to a given institution, such as mascots, slogans, legends, and ceremonials. These forms assist in identifying what is characteristic of an institution, enabling organizational members to answer the "Who are we?" question.

Conflict in Hybrid Identity Organizations

Conflict in dual-identity organizations revolves around efforts to “[resolve] different answers to the profound form of the identity question: ‘Why are we?’” (Albert, Godfrey, and Whetten, 1999, p. 7). People in various sectors within these organizations tend to answer the question differently, often on the basis of matters such as who sets expectations, determines evaluation standards, or holds them accountable. In athletics, for instance, these are primarily external to the organization (fans, boosters, corporate sponsors, and so on). But pleasing outsiders may alienate others within the organization, such as faculty who work under another set of standards and answer to another audience. Any university that tries to be “so many different things to so many different people . . . must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself” (Kerr, 2001, p. 7). Because what is contested, like academic values or professional tendencies in athletics, is central and enduring, conflict tends to persist and reform or change can be quite difficult. Competing elements simply cannot be compromised, but often the organization cannot just be disaggregated; opponents must continue to coexist, however difficult that might be (Albert, Godfrey, and Whetten, 1999). In other words, athletics are likely to have a persistent orientation that is in significant conflict with the university generally, but the two cannot simply agree to part ways; athletes must be students and institutions must have control.

But the conflict is not entirely black and white. Academic values are part of athletics, just as there is a business side to academe. So both sides must also contend with an internal struggle, not just one between them, in answering the “Why are we?” question. In both academe and athletics, each side must reconcile educational values and commercial pressures. But each side stresses elements of its own, with values paramount in academe and commercialism more prominent in spectator sports. Educational values and business pressures in organizations can have, according to Albert and colleagues (1999), incompatible, inviolate, and indispensable elements. In other words, there are some areas where compromise or conciliation is impossible. These characterize the profound conflict—the “civil war”—within broader organizations (Albert, Godfrey, and Whetten, 1999, p. 7), hardening the conflict between and among sides.

Inviolate elements simply cannot be compromised as they assume a “sacred” and “unalterable quality” and face resistance to change (Albert and Adams, 2002). The stand by the NCAA against paying athletes is inviolate, given the principle of amateurism that is at its foundation. The same is true of institutional control over athletics—the connection with universities justifies the entire existence of college sports. For athletes to compete, academic values dictate that they must be legitimate students, so various rules associated with recruiting and eligibility are inviolate. Inviolate elements provide clarity within organizations (and between them), defining what must persist.

Indispensable elements are those that could be eliminated or separated from the organization, but that continue because they are fundamental to its functioning, meaning, and legitimacy. Albert and Adams (2002) suggest that “the test that [something] is held to be indispensable is the degree of outrage that follows an attempt to eliminate it: that is, we would no longer be a church, business, hospital, etc., if we no longer did that (embraced that value, offered that service, etc.)” (pp. 35–36). Given the longstanding place of spectator sports (and athletics generally) in higher education, would American universities continue to be what they are without them? Those representing faculty opposition to commercialized athletics, such as the COIA and the Drake Group, would say that this is clearly possible. But other constituents would surely disagree, arguing that spectator sports are part of the essence of the institutions that sponsor them. Similarly, athletic programs might ask whether they could simply jettison institutional control and amateur ideals, but they might respond that they would no longer be what they are.

Incompatible elements are mismatched and unable to coexist, producing conflicting identities that make answering the “Why are we?” question difficult, as they promote “opposing values, ideologies, design logic, or operating activities” (Albert, Godfrey, and Whetten, 1999, p. 17). Spectator sports and the research, instructional, and service missions of institutions are likely not incompatible. Both have commercial elements within an enterprise founded on pure values, and each focuses, in its own way, on educating students—preparing them for life. Differences are found, however, in notions such as evaluation standards and practices in spectator sports being rooted in a “win at all cost” philosophy (Barefield and others, 1997). Coaches, for instance, in sports such as football and men’s basketball within the most prominent athletics programs, either win or are dismissed, despite how successful their athletes are as students (provided they retain their eligibility). Such decisions are rooted in commercial realities, which are incompatible with traditional academic sensibilities (although less so with the realities of the contemporary research university).

Managing Dual Identities

Reconciling dual identities requires managing dilemmas or paradoxes that can never be eliminated, only managed but not solved (Albert, Godfrey, and Whetten, 1999). The challenge is that both sides, academe and athletics, make decisions that seem appropriate to them but that the other sees as inappropriate and even unacceptable. Pratt and Foreman (2000) suggest that managing dual-identity organizations requires deemphasizing conflict and finding productive synergy among the academic and business identities. Managers can keep identities separate (compartmentalization), delete one of them (deletion), fuse them into a distinct new whole (integration), or retain various identities and form links between and among them (aggregation).

They should do so on the basis of the optimal number of identities and degree of synergy for the organization. High-plurality responses such as compartmentalization or aggregation are appropriate in areas such as spectator sports within universities, given that current identities have strong support from powerful internal stakeholders, identities are viewed by external stakeholders as a legitimate part of the organization, and institutional leaders view dual identities as having strategic value (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). Even though there is internal opposition to spectator sports, there is also support, as well as synergy with institutional purposes in areas such as fundraising and building community.

High-synergy responses, such as integration and aggregation, are most appropriate when there is a significant degree of interdependence among stakeholders (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). Although the academic ideas of the university and the commercial realities of spectator sports often have opposing central, enduring, and distinctive features, values, and priorities, academe and athletics are highly interdependent. Athletics rely on academe for legitimacy, and spectator sports serve the commercial and communal needs of institutions. These mutual uses are important, making synergy a critical strategy in both academe and athletics; managing (and even embracing) various dilemmas and paradoxes associated with dual-identity organizations is critical.

For athletic directors, two management strategies offer options in managing dual identities. *Janusian integration* is similar to aggregation, creating a “two-faced” identity from two existing identities. Janusian thinking involves considering opposites together, especially their relationships, interplay, similarities, and advantages, and then creating something new and useful. Pratt and Foreman (2000) describe the sociological concept of ambinormative concern, in which two or more conflicting norms are fused to create a new norm. An example is the notion of “detached concern” in medicine, the expectation of doctors being simultaneously objective and compassionate. Similarly, the NCAA-created term *student athlete* is not meant as an inherent contradiction of priorities, but instead to “[help] protect the indispensable link between athletics and education” (Crowley, 2006, p. 216). The phrase itself suggests both dual identities but also the possibilities for synergy.

Aggregation offers another set of possibilities, occurring when “an organization attempts to retain all of its identities while forging links between them” (Pratt and Foreman, 2000, p. 32). Organizations may use aggregation to emphasize aspects of themselves in diverse contexts, such as the academic identity of athletics before the faculty senate and its business identity before boosters. “Common ground” techniques are also useful, emphasizing the “shared we” or the “espousal of shared values” (Pratt and Foreman, 2000, p. 33), as in using athletics in encouraging school spirit. For instance, various athletics symbols such as nicknames or mascots come to represent an entire university, with logos from athletics appearing on university letterhead and

business cards, or the stadium cheer “We are Virginia Tech!” serving to unite a campus (and even a nation) in mourning. Similarly, athletics programs are well served to espouse academic values, which only increase their credibility. They can, concretely, refuse to hire coaches who show past disregard for academic integrity or otherwise poor ethical behavior; they can use rhetorical tactics such as the phrase student athletes or express the desire for “excellence in all we do,” including academic accomplishments. Doing so underscores relationships between dual identities, reinforcing the belief that members are all part of the same organization (Pratt and Foreman, 2000).

Concluding Thoughts

Athletics programs, like universities generally, must be responsive to their dual identities. The prominence of spectator sports brings needed notoriety to institutions, and they certainly have a commercial character. But their academic identity is also a central, enduring, and distinctive aspect of athletics. Again, by NCAA rule athletes must be bona fide students and institutions must maintain control. Similarly, there is a commercial aspect to academe beyond traditional educational values. But conflict between these dual identities is inherent. Connections between the athletics business and academic values are not always obvious. Splitt and others (2007) summarize the paradox of spectator sports within institutions of higher education:

The NCAA bases its entire athletic philosophy around the concept of amateurism. However, we find it indefensible that the NCAA simultaneously adopts a purely professional corporate-sport model in matters pertaining to coaches' compensation, corporate partnerships, maximization of revenue streams, stadium-naming rights, television-broadcast contracts, and the bowl championship series [pp. 10].

These scholars are only partly correct. Attempting to reconcile ideals of amateurism and corporate realities is not indefensible. Such paradoxes and dilemmas are inherent to hybrid organizations. Indeed, these conflicts will persist so long as athletics programs have both academic and business identities. Although intractable identity conflicts cannot be eliminated, they can be alleviated by locating and emphasizing dual-identity synergies.

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