"They Cherish Us; They Worship Us": An Examination of Organizational Socialization Processes in Division I Collegiate Athletics Organizations

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Abstract
This study advances the literature on sports contexts within the realm of organizational communication generally as well as extends existing research into the socialization process of nontraditional organizations and the impact of ritual and tradition on assimilation. The goal of this study was to determine how student-athletes experience the socialization process. Results suggest that teammate familiarity is the best predictors of levels of perceived assimilation. In addition, student athletes' perceptions of assimilation were influenced by the kind of encounter phase experienced by the athlete and team traditions. Practical implications for these findings suggest ways that university athletics programs may be able to reduce athlete turnover in the age of the most prominent use of the transfer portal that college athletics has ever seen. Additionally, theoretical implications include situating collegiate athletics organizations as both similar and dissimilar to other nontraditional organizations that have been well-researched in the literature as well as challenging some notions of the socialization processes and structuration model as they have been applied to nontraditional organizations.
Keywords: Student-athlete, Organizational socialization, Non-traditional organization, Assimilation, Ritual

Generations of work with organizational socialization have created a robust repertoire of information about the ways that individuals go from being on the outside of an organization's membership to finding themselves a member of the in-group. Research into organizational assimilation has expanded understanding of the success of assimilation practices, membership effects on organizational structure, and assimilation into vocational careers (Jahn & Myers, 2014; Myers et al., 2011), extracurricular (Cranmer, 2018; Fontana et al., 2021), volunteer (Kramer, 2011), and nontraditional organizations (Hinderaker & Garner, 2016). Cranmer (2018) and Fontana et al. (2021) analyzed organizational socialization within the context of collegiate sports programs. Collegiate athletics programs require athletes to perform at the highest level with, oftentimes, no certainty that their role within the organization will stay the same or even that their membership within the organization will continue year to year or even day to day. Athletes are required to yield to extensive demands on their time as well their physical and mental health (Gerdy, 1997).

This study, then, sought to understand the indicators of high levels of perceived assimilation into the organization's culture and expectations as student-athletes attempt to cope with the high levels of stress brought on by the extensive demands of this kind of organization. By understanding the role that assimilation plays in helping to alleviate some degree of stress for student-athletes, who, in general, have incredibly high levels of stress brought on by the high expectations of this particular kind of organizational membership, communication scholars can help to provide feedback on and potential remedies for socialization practices that are not effective. Understanding how Division I student-athletes experience the socialization and assimilation processes can influence perceived levels of assimilation can help to uncover answers to pertinent problems within collegiate athletics such as burnout, turnover, athlete stress, etc.

Jablin (1982; 1984; 1987; 2001) theorized organizational assimilation as a phasic process involving anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis, and ultimately, exit. For Jablin, socialization is an inherently communicative process, with members constantly seeking and processing information in each phase. First, individuals who desire to become part of a given organization undergo the anticipatory socialization phase. While there has been quite a bit of expansion in this area since Jablin's initial conceptualization, this stage can be succinctly described as the information- seeking and expectation-building phase. During this stage, potential organizational members gather as much information as they can about the organization before they initiate a desire to join. When prospective players, particularly those actively being recruited out of high school, are approaching the transition between high school and collegiate athletics, they often are invited to or travel of their volition to several college campuses. Stepping foot on the campus tied to a particular college sports team is an essential part of the anticipatory socialization process for many athletes. This is due to the ability to interact with potential teammates, coaches, training staff, managers, etc. and the ability to engage with training facilities, dining halls, team locations, dorms, and other aspects of the campus. Once the new member has officially entered the organization, they enter the encounter phase (Jablin, 2001), where they begin to become acquainted with the culture and expectations of the organization as well as with the other organizational members including coworkers and supervisors, and reconcile expectations from anticipatory socialization with the reality of their new role.

For student-athletes, this occurs after the conclusion of the school year, usually, in May or June, many college athletics programs will begin to bring their recruits to campus to participate in summer camps and practices. This is often the first time that these new athletes begin to experience assimilation into the organization. In the encounter stage, the new member of the organization may be seen as an untrustworthy newcomer. Jablin describes how, even though the member has been officially welcomed into the organization either by signing a job offer or, in the case of student-athletes, declaring an intention to sign with a particular university's program, the new member has not yet been socially accepted by their coworkers. Just as with the anticipatory stage, the encounter phase is all about information seeking and gathering. However, at this point, the new member begins to seek out information regarding the more hidden or covert aspects of the organization. Through observation, third-party questioning, overt and indirect questioning, and testing the waters, eventually the new member begins to mesh with the culture and norms of the organization.

Some scholars would argue that with enough time entrenched within the organization's culture, the new member can enter the metamorphosis sheerly by their own will. In this stage, the member has become meshed with the culture and more covert expectations of the organization through getting to know one's coworkers, experiencing events in the workplace firsthand, and through trial and error. At this point in the socialization process, Jablin (1982) argues that the transition from a new member to

an organizational insider is complete. Scholars have linked long periods of information seeking in both anticipatory socialization and encounter with more realistic organizational expectations, and therefore, more seamless metamorphosis (Gibson & Papa, 2000; Myers & Oetzel, 2003). This study, therefore, first asks:

> RQ1: How do first-year student-athletes experience the socialization process?

The line between identification and assimilation literature is necessarily murky, as one process inevitably involves the other; members who are identified tend to metamorphose, those unidentified tend to either exit (DiSanza, 1995), or remain in the organization, but as an inside-outsider, never fully assimilated (Bullis & Bach, 1989). Both relationships newcomers build within the organization (Jablin, 1987; 2001) and organizational rituals marking membership milestones have been tied to deeper levels of organizational identification and fuller metamorphosis (Myers, 2005; Myers & McPhee, 2006). Organizational ritual and tradition have been linked to member identification and satisfaction. Smith and Stewart (2006) advance a spectrum of rituals based on their completeness, frequency of performance, and effect. For them, ceremonial or official ritual are considered full rituals, whereas more casual interpersonal traditions, like those involved in this study of student-athlete teams, are ritual-like, and serve to provide meaning, reinforce culture, and signal member commitment (Smith & Stewart, 2006). For student-athletes, participation in team rituals and traditions solidifies cultural belonging on the team and may relate to metamorphosis. This study, therefore, asks:

> RQ2: How do team traditions impact first-year student athletes' perceptions of assimilation?

Methods

The use of a survey as the primary means of data collection removes the impact of research intrusion in distilling the experiences of fans whose team has experienced an embarrassing or devastating loss. This study is situated in the search for contextual, value-imbued knowledge that qualitative research seeks to uncover. Tracy (2013) highlighted how qualitative inquiry allows researchers the opportunity to collect data that represents participants' voices and lived experiences as opposed to qualitative data that removes information from the context that created it. Participants of this study included fifty-seven (N = 57) student-athletes located at a medium-sized, private university in the southern United States. All participants were associated with a collegiate sports team recognized by the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). The primary survey conducted via Qualtrics included three qualitative, open-ended questions that were used to answer both questions posed by this study. Participant responses were then analyzed using an open and axial coding procedure aimed at uncovering the role that team tradition and ritual had on feelings of perceived assimilation among first-year student athletes.

Results

Teammate Familiarity as an Influence on Assimilation

In answering the first of this study's two research questions, this section of the analysis is twofold featuring, first, a discussion on feelings of teammate familiarity. One of the three open-ended questions that participants were asked to respond to, dealt with defining what it meant to be a member of their selected organization. Participants' responses fell into one of two categories — discussing a system of high expectations and high rewards and defining the team as a family. The first of the two categories has to do with the ways that participants discussed how much labor, both physical and emotional, goes into being a part of the team. Several respondents discussed how being a part of the team required everyone to put in high levels of work nearly every single day just to remain a part of the organization. And yet, the participants discuss how this hard work is accepted by every member of the organization because of the rewards.

Participants often discussed the possibility of playing this sport at a professional level one day, but more often than that, the respondents discuss how the relationships they have formed with their teammates and coaches were actually the rewards they gain from working so hard and taking on such high levels of stress. In general, participants reported at high levels that they understood what it meant to be a part of their given team in terms of the informal culture derived from the values and practices of the team. Participant #57 discussed how understanding the values of the team requires not only an understanding of the team's values but also a level of self-sacrifice. "It means that you value the team's objectives over your own, you do your part, pull your weight, and know that you should always give your best for the people next to you because they're doing the same." This idea of self-sacrifice to obtain the perceived benefits of joining a collegiate athletics team is indicated by this high mean score for acculturation.

This data suggests that not only do these student-athletes need to understand the culture,

values, and expectations of the organization, they need to value them alongside if not above their own values. In addition, the second category in which participants discussed defining their organization refers to the sheer number of times the word "family" came up in participants' answers about what it meant to be a part of the team. In addition to accepting the values of the organization as one's own, participants' comparisons of their teams as a family unit represent an identity that goes beyond simply identifying oneself as an athlete. Not only do these student-athletes, largely, consider their teammates coworkers, and even friends, they actively acknowledge a stronger connection. Participant #35 stated that "It's one big family. Everyone rallies together and cares for each other. The coaches' families and the staff are all part of this team." This idea that the family gained by joining the organization expands beyond the coaches and other players of the team and is integral in understanding how student-athletes understand the community present in and behind their organization.

Encounter as an Influence on Assimilation
Participants were also asked to recall their first experience at the university and to recall what that experience was like. The addition of this question sought to understand the role that the initial encounter experienced by student-athletes might have impacted overall perceptions of assimilation. The data received on this question lent itself to three categories of analysis — "it feels like home", "valuing of information", and "immersion". In the category of "it feels like home," participants discussed how from the minute they stepped onto the university's campus the first time, they felt as though they had come home; in twenty-seven of the fifty-seven responses to these questions, participants directly referred to their team as "home".

Participants discussed how the coaches and the older teammates had done a lot to make the potential members feel as though they could make meaningful connections with the members of the team and form an identity of not only an athlete but a member of this family. Participant #6 said that "The coaches showed me around the facilities and told me that they want me to love this university and this city, not just baseball. The team members were all so welcoming and made the university a place that actually felt like home."

In addition to valuing the activity in and of itself and that of the team, participants discussed how the coaches and even other teammates encouraged recruits to value the culture of the city and the university. This desire to make recruits aware of everything that the city, university, and team have to offer them

is important for having athletes feel like this point in their lives can be as comfortable and supportive as home.

Second, in the category of "valuing of information," participants discussed how during their first visits to the campus, they were bombarded with information from the very beginning of their experience with the organization. Participants discussed how the organizations' coaches and administrative staff provided a plethora of information to inform potential new members of the high expectations but also the high rewards that came with membership so that they were not surprised down the road. Participant #30 discussed how much information is thrown at an athlete that is expected to play at the highest level of collegiate competition. "They cherish and worship us as recruits….the coaches want us to be aware of how hard this thing can really be; teams need the best players if they want to be the best."

Division I collegiate athletes are expected to perform at very high levels. Many of the participants in this study discuss how much information is thrown at them during the recruitment process but also in their first few weeks on the team and even throughout their tenure as a member of the organization. The expectations for these athletes are incredibly high, so coaches and administrative staff must reach a balance between conveying those expectations to the athletes in effective ways and still finding ways to maximize the relational component of the organization because of its importance in creating a network of strong social support. Participant #44 said of the encounter phase "It was a good experience where I learned a lot about what it takes to play at the highest level but also got the chance to know the guys and make friendships even before I committed here."

Lastly, in the category of 'immersion,' participants discussed how they were thrown into practicing with the team, attending meetings, or engaging in communication with other organizational members that made them feel like they were already a member of the team before they had received a formal invitation or given a formal acceptance. These recruitment processes hinge so much on making the recruits aware of the expectations of the team as soon as possible, and many recruits discussed this beginning in-depth even before they had committed to the university. Participant #28 stated, "as soon as I got to campus for my unofficial visit, I was already getting to know the personalities of the people… I even got to run some drills with the guys five minutes after meeting some of them." Participant #39 said that "As soon as I got here, the coaches wanted

me to know what I was getting into. On that first weekend, it didn't feel like I had a second to myself."

The immediacy demonstrated through these quotations and echoed by others in the data set is indicative of the importance of getting athletes of the highest caliber to commit to a university's athletics programs. As a result, these athletes begin to undergo the assimilation process as soon as they step foot on campus and, in some instances, even before that. This high intensity behind the recruitment procedures is then transferred to the assimilation process as well; student-athletes are thrown into the bulk of this process before they have even officially joined the organization in some instances. Intense and immediate assimilation of student-athletes is important for creating a culture of high expectations early in the athlete's tenure on the team and could be partially responsible for either consistent high levels of perceived assimilation throughout this organizational membership or, in some cases, increased levels of burnout due to the intensity of this assimilation process form the very beginning.

Team Traditions and Perceived Assimilation
In answering the second of this study's posed research questions, participants were asked to indicate their favorite team tradition as well as to describe why it was their favorite. The responses to this question revealed two categories — traditions that valued the activity and traditions that allowed participants to value each other. In the first category, participants discussed traditions that were specific to engaging in their given activity. For example, several participants from the school's baseball team discussed how the team competes against one another in a world series after their fall camp. Participant #23 stated:

> *The Purple and White World Series is super meaningful because we get to draft our teammates and it means something a little extra because it's the only time we really compete against one another. It's special to all of us because it usually ends in the fall semester. When Spring rolls around, it's time to get serious.*

The activity-specific tradition is indicative of organization-specific values that reflect the standards set up by the coaches as early as the encounter phase for many of these players. Here, the participant discusses a competitive environment being fostered even at times of the year when the players are not engaged in competition against other universities which is indicative of a strong value of competitiveness bred into the very DNA of the activity. Some participants also discussed things like

celebrating each other's accomplishments during games or at meets. The values of the organization present in activity-specific traditions do not have to be in tension with one another; a tradition that upholds the value of competitiveness can also uphold the value of camaraderie. This idea is present in both the responses from Participants #33 and #28. Both respondents discuss team traditions like running through the tunnel before a home football game, hugging one another after home runs, and dancing in the team's bullpen during games that indicate the values of competitiveness and camaraderie working in tandem rather than in opposition to one another.

The team activities described in the data prop up this idea of the high level of competition present at this level of athletics, an idea that has been described numerous times throughout the study's results to this point. However, the value of team camaraderie in these instances of high competitiveness is equally as important to defining the culture of the organization. The second category dealt with traditions that allowed the participants to value their relationships with other members of the team off the field. Some of these participants discussed things like team dinners, game nights in their team dorms, and even engaging in other activities outside of the university together like playing golf or hunting. Participant #21 stated that "the best tradition team has is that all eat together every night at the athletic dining hall; we see each other so much during the day and still want to hang out after that and get dinner. We have become a lot closer because of this." This idea of tradition and ritual that doesn't have to do with the organization in and of itself and yet can help to facilitate strong interpersonal connections between team members is integral to yielding high levels of perceived assimilation.

Discussion

Understanding how successful collegiate athletics programs are in terms of making their athletes feel connected to team culture provides both practical and theoretical implications. Practically, this research can help the administrative staff of these athletics programs reduce the amount of athlete turnover due to an incredibly athlete-friendly transfer portal. In recent years the transfer portal for the majority of major college sports has become more friendly to the athletes who choose to utilize it, in that there are no longer extremely long periods in which transfer athletes are ineligible to compete at their new school. Because of this relaxation in the playing requirements, far more athletes across all sports are entering the transfer portal now more than ever. While the primary reason that an athlete may enter the portal is

due to a perceived lack of playing time, several other reasons stem from a failure to adequately socialize within the culture of the previous organization. Understanding which practices, both formal and informal, of assimilation are successful and socializing athletes into the culture of the team and which are not may help to reduce athlete turnover to some degree.

Theoretically speaking, this study also has a few interesting implications. First, by opening up the research of organizational assimilation to non-traditional organizations like collegiate athletics programs can help expand the theoretical models beyond the limitations of only studying a select few kinds of organizations. For example, determining which formal assimilation practices are the most successful at retaining athletes who constantly have an escape hatch in that they have access to the transfer portal at all times, could help more conventional organizations begin to combat this recent wave of job hopping by shining light on processes that might be able to retain employees for longer periods. Just as a perceived lack of playing time is the primary reason that athletes enter the transfer portal, a perceived lack of adequate compensation is a primary reason that entry-level workers jump ship to other organizations.

Additionally, collegiate athletics organizations resemble, in some ways, other sorts of organizations that have been studied at length within the field of organizational communication, and yet, college sports teams are also inherently unique. In many ways, these organizations function much like a conventional workplace. The student-athletes, even if they are not technically employees of their organization, provide a service to the team in exchange for some reward. In the case of athletes, obviously, this reward is the opportunity to grow over time and potentially play at a professional level after completing college. These athletes also undergo very similar processes of the socialization model including the encounter phase, the assimilation process, and eventually organizational exit; however, each of these stages can look very different. Participants discussed how different the encounter phase can be for student-athletes because of the high expectations that are such an innate part of the organization's identity.

While potential employees of more traditional organizations experience the encounter and assimilation phases in distinct ways, student-athletes almost experience these stages simultaneously. Even before an athlete has committed to a university, there are bombarded with information about the organization, tasked with building relationships with potential teammates, and, in some cases, even begin practicing with the team before they are even

an official member of said team. Because of the high expectations of the team, the need to be 'caught up to speed' immediately is incredibly important to both the athlete as an individual and to the team at large. This high expectation as a facet of organizational identity more mimics that of high-reliability organizations than it does a traditional workplace, and yet, collegiate athletics teams are distinct from HROs in many ways as well. This conceptualization of athletic organizations may challenge the way that the stages of socialization have been studied in the literature; further research on this relationship between encounter and assimilation is needed, particularly within the context of athletics organizations.

Secondly, examining both the formal and informal assimilation practices utilized by college athletics programs has an impact on expanding the structuration perspective on organizational communication. Myers and Oetzel (2003) discuss how organizational socialization is inherently bound to membership negotiation. The perpetual cycle of bringing in new employees as others leave for other positions, retire or die plays into the organization's ability to constantly create and recreate itself, and membership is central to that idea. The structuration approach posits that very little can be done from within the organization to change the cycle of recreation because it is simply too strong; change can only happen incrementally unless there is an immediate, groundbreaking change that occurs all at once and forces the cycle to be momentarily broken, thus forcing it to adapt to this new change or else die out. Changing the assimilation practices can be a change of that magnitude. If current organizational members decide to change, particularly the informal practices of socialization and assimilation within an organization, it is possible that great change can occur as a result.

Lastly, the use of the phrase "like a family" by so many of the participants in this study challenge the downsides of value-based organizations that have been discussed in the literature on both traditional and nontraditional organizations. Rather than the term family being used by organizational leadership as a way to control members through some faux relational connection, the term is used for and by the members, in this case, the athletes, themselves. This direct engagement with the strong values of the organization in beneficial ways may work to challenge how value-based organizations have been studied thus far.

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