

Perspectives on Image and Identity in Organizational Adaptation: A Case Study of the New England Small College Athletic Conference

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**Session 28: Organizational Theory
Presentation (25-minute)**

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1:00 PM - 1:25 PM

This 25-minute oral presentation seeks to test the applicability of the model established by Dutton and Dukerich (1991) in assessing how stakeholders in the New England Small Conference Athletic Conference (NESCAC), an American intercollegiate athletic conference, make sense of the key strategic issues and developments and microprocesses involved in organizational adaptation, specifically changes in stakeholder expectations in the goals and values of the intercollegiate athletic experience. Dutton and Dukerich posit that an organization's image and identity guide and activate an individual's interpretations of an issue and the motivations for actions on it, and those interpretations and motivations affect patterns of organizational activities over time. This presentation reviews the constructs of organizational identity and image, and links them to the context of NESCAC and American intercollegiate athletics.

Data from six sources were used to test the model: (1) interviews with each of the NESCAC ADs conducted between October 2000 and February 2001, (2) interviews with eight NESCAC presidents conducted between October 1999 and February 2000, (3) minutes from conference meetings and studies and reports concerning relevant issues such as admissions, recruiting, squad sizes and institutional resources from the conference and individual institutions, (4) articles from journal and newspapers, (5) information from content specific texts (including *The game of life*, *The gatekeepers*, and *Reclaiming the game*), (6) personal communications with other stakeholders and personnel at NESCAC and other similar collegiate institutions (coaches, student-athletes, athletic administrators).

AD and presidential interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes, were conducted in the campus office of each subject, and were tape-recorded and transcribed by the author. Each subject was asked the same battery of questions, and was also allowed to comment at will at issues he or she deemed to be relevant or important. The interview questions were based in part on responses in a brief pretest written survey completed by each AD and president. Survey respondents listed their level of agreement with questions that sought to define the social constructs of organizational identity, including managerial relationships with intercollegiate athletics stakeholder groups, stakeholder perceptions and attitudes toward the importance of intercollegiate athletics, and how these perceptions related to the stated goals of the conference.

The interview questions focused more specifically on investigating manager-stakeholder relationships, and reflections on the meaning of school and NESCAC events, policies and actions. Questions also sought to collect data to understand the construction and presentation of organizational images, the interpretation of identity relevant feedback, and cognitive reconstructive activities.

Athletics in NESCAC has its own central, distinct and enduring qualities. NESCAC member schools can be accurately described as small (the mean undergraduate student population is approximately 2200), as well as highly selective (the mean combined SAT score for students entering NESCAC schools in 2002 was just over 1320) and academically rigorous. The schools are among the most selective and perceived as among the most prestigious institutions of higher education in America. Intercollegiate athletic participation is also an important aspect of life of conference campuses. Intercollegiate athletics participation rates approach 50 percent of the student body at nine member schools, and the conference average of varsity teams sponsored is 28.

The data sources reveal that NESCAC's reactions to shifting and evolving stakeholder perceptions of the goals and values of intercollegiate athletics can be mapped onto five phases. The model incorporates the segmenting of each phase into three components: key events, major interpretations, and major actions. The purpose of this analysis is to describe how interpretations and actions relating to changing expectations of the intercollegiate athletic experience within NESCAC. Key events are defined as the major developments and changes that were identified as significant during a given phase of the issue's evolution. Each event is critical toward in understanding how ADs, presidents, and stakeholders interpret the issue at each phase and why the organization took certain actions.

This study of the role of organizational identity and image reveals that the issue of stakeholder perceptions of the goals and values of NESCAC intercollegiate athletics is ever evolving, and revealed two central themes in the patterns of interpretation

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and responses to the issue. Specifically, the model allows for the conclusion that NESCAC's identity, as held by NESCAC ADs and presidents, served to establish policies and procedures regarding intercollegiate athletics at the conference's founding, and served to influence and to shift conference policies back closer to what was perceived as the founding ethos during the most recent phases. NESCAC's image - how these managers perceived stakeholder saw the conference - also influenced decision making when the conference reacted to changing expectations toward postseason play. The actions taken on these issues serve as the basis for the formation and continued existence of NESCAC, and continue to serve as evidence of the conference's responses to the environment. These actions have both transformed and reinforced NESCAC's organizational identity and image through the efforts of ADs and presidents. The model serves as a solid and effective basis from which to assess the data and to draw conclusions.

Understanding NESCAC's identity illustrates the evolution of stakeholder perceptions of the values and goals of intercollegiate athletics. These elements seek to test the basic theories of how organizational identity affects adaptation processes by its effect on issue interpretations, emotions, and actions.

Dutton, J.E., & Dukerich, J.M. (1991). Keeping an eye on the mirror: Image and identity in organizational adaptation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34 (1), 517-554.