

**Assessing the impact of athletics success upon perceived external prestige of colleges and universities through internal stakeholders**

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According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals possess the ability to construct self, and group, identities, constantly creating and maintaining their existence. Essential to this maintenance, is the creation of in-groups and out-groups that are the core of these identities. In line with identity research, organizational identity has been found to play a salient role in member behavior (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). That is, the greater an organization can get its members i.e. employees, workers, students, alumni, etc. to identify with the organization, the greater the extent of efficient, or effective, behavior. The stronger the organization identity, the stronger the bonds that are created that separate those within the organization from those on the outside. Specifically, organization identity has been shown to positively impact commitment (Carmelli, Gillat, & Weisberg, 2006), social capital (Carmelli, 2007), and citizenship behaviors (Carmelli, 2005). Further, extant literature has also examined the extent to which factors, then, impact organizational identification. These impacts include perceived external prestige (e.g. Carmelli et al., 2006) and perceived organizational reputation (Carmelli & Tishler, 2005).

Organizational identity and prestige have also been found to impact donor behavior of alumni and non-alumni towards universities in both their academic funds (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and athletic funds (Stinson & Howard, 2007). Furthermore, universities have seen their organizational prestige connected with athletics as even non-alumni, external shareholders connect perceptions of athletics success with perceptions of both overall external prestige, as well as academic prestige (Goidel & Hamilton, 2006; Lovaglia & Lucas, 2005). Many large universities use high profile athletics programs to promote their school to important stakeholders, including students, alumni, local communities, and government officials (Toma, 1999). Still, scant literature exists that explores the existence of organization, or university, identification among current students and the role that athletics plays in their perceptions of their college or university. This research was designed, then, to bridge this hole in the literature by exploring the topic of organizational identity, its most salient factors, and the perceived impact of athletics through current, traditional-aged undergraduate students.

Specifically, the research question guiding this study aimed at exploring the extent to which athletics success impacted students' perceptions of overall external prestige (Carmelli et al., 2006) of their institution. To achieve this, two four-item subscales were derived from Carmelli (2005) who suggested that perceived external prestige (PEP) is actually a summation of both social prestige and economic prestige. Thus, more appropriately, two subscales were adapted to measure perceived external academic prestige of the university and perceived external athletic prestige of the university. Added together, these measurements accounted for an institution's overall PEP. Further, the extent to which students identified with athletics (i.e. fan identity, Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and the university (i.e. university identity, Mael & Ashforth, 1992) were also ascertained. Finally, athletics success of the current year was assessed across three measures: overall Directors' Cup Points totals for overall athletics success, winning percentage of the university's football team, and the winning percentage of the university's men's basketball team.

Data were collected from randomly-selected college students (N=1800) from university website directories across NCAA BCS institutions. A total sample of 934 students responded for an overall response rate of 51.89%. After removing students from the sample due to age or school year limitations (n=187) or due to incomplete responses (n=113), the overall sample of usable responses (n=634) provided a usable response rate of 35.22%. Separate multiple regression analyses were constructed to predict overall PEP of the university, along with its two subscales regarding overall academic prestige and athletic prestige. Tinto's (1977) Input-Environment-Output method to analyze the responses of college students was used for hierarchical input of the independent variables in the regression steps. However, due to the nature of exploration on the extent to which each variable of athletics success impacted prestige, the three variables were entered together in the final step using a stepwise method of entry, as opposed to previous steps where variables were theoretically-guided into the analyses.

Initial results indicated that athletics success did significantly predict overall PEP, in addition to the individual subsets of academic prestige and athletic prestige. Overall prestige was significantly impacted by each measure of athletics success, with Directors' Cup Point totals contributing the most ( $\beta=.31, p<.001$ ), followed by basketball success ( $\beta=.11, p<.01$ ), and football success ( $\beta=.10, p<.05$ ). Not surprisingly, both fan identity ( $\beta=.12, p<.05$ ) and university identity of the respondents ( $\beta=.27, p<.001$ ) also contributed to perceptions of overall prestige. Of note, however, were the divergent results stemming from the individual prestige subscales. As with overall prestige, all measures of success contributed significantly to athletic prestige, with

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overall success in the Directors' Cup carrying the greatest amount of weight ( $\beta=.29, p<.001$ ), followed by basketball success ( $\beta=.21, p<.001$ ) and football success ( $\beta=.19, p<.001$ ). Both fan identity ( $\beta=.21, p<.001$ ) and university identity ( $\beta=.17, p<.05$ ), again, contributed significantly to perception of athletic prestige. However, in predicting perceptions of academic prestige, neither basketball success nor football success maintained any significant presence in the relationship. Interestingly, though, overall athletics success did exhibit a significant position within the relationship ( $\beta=.23, p<.001$ ). Further, while university identity, as it was expected, contributed to perceived academic prestige ( $\beta=.37, p<.001$ ), the fan identity of the respondents did not. These results bring into question the connection between athletics success and the overall mission of colleges and universities.

While previous research using external constituents of the university indicate athletics success (specifically, men's basketball and football) significantly enhances the overall academic prestige of the university (e.g. Goidel & Hamilton, 2006), such a finding did not occur with the students in this sample. This finding beckons for further research into the perceptions and nature of the impact of high-profile athletics success. Also of note, was the connection between overall athletics success – rather than men's basketball or football success – with academic prestige. This finding suggests that an investment in an overall athletics department may be connected with some of the values or mission of the overall institution. Ultimately, though, overall athletics success, as well as high-profile success, did enhance the overall perceived external prestige according to the students. This finding not only confirmed notions from previous literature, but seems to lend some credence to the ability of athletics success to contribute to the overall existence of a college or university.