Radical organizational change involves breaking from an existing orientation (Johnson, 1987; Miller 1982, 1990) and then transforming the organization (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Radical organizational change is significant when institutional prescriptions change dramatically; the resultant organizational response would be revolutionary, not evolutionary in terms of the scale and pace of upheaval and adjustment (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). One such industry in which radical organization change occurs is intercollegiate athletics.

Organizational change, at some level, is a common occurrence within intercollegiate athletics. Intercollegiate athletics are in constant change: employee and athlete turnover, parts of the organization’s physical layout are reorganized and new programs or product lines are developed (Slack & Parent, 2006). These though would not be revolutionary. One current example of radical organizational change is Simon Fraser University, a university outside of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada and member of the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), and its move to join the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in all sports beginning in the 2011-2012 athletic season at the Division II level (US Fed News, 2009). Similar instances could occur at United States universities as they change division classifications (ex. Division II to Division FCS) but this is the first instance that a CIS has gained official membership into the NCAA.

Thus, the broad research question is how is organizational culture affected, both positively and negatively, within the intercollegiate athletic setting for those institutions making an organizational transition, particularly Simon Fraser and other CIS universities deciding on moving to the NCAA? The organizational culture perspective has been a common way to examine businesses (Rollins & Roberts, 1998) and educational institutions (Wolfe & Strange, 2003). However, little research has studied the link between organizational culture and athletic departments. In fact, Beyer and Hannah (2000) have suggested that “a central challenge for those who would reform collegiate athletics is to recognize and deal with these cultural characteristics” (p. 127).

Many organizational theorists acknowledge Schein’s (1992) conception of organizational culture as the pattern of shared assumptions that guide behavior in organizations (Ott, 1989; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1993; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Slack, 1997; Schroeder & Scribner, 2006). While many lenses exist through which organizational life can be viewed (i.e. structural or political) (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Schroeder & Scribner, 2006), the organizational culture perspective provides the best access to both the symbolic and interpretive elements of organizations (Morgan, 1997; Schroeder & Scribner, 2006).

Schein’s (1992) perspective assumes organizations are ambiguous and unpredictable entities that exist in open environments (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Schroeder & Scribner, 2006). This uncertainty leads organizations and its members to develop ideologies and assumptions to create cognitive stability and conform to the external environment to reduce uncertainty (Schein, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Schroeder & Scribner, 2006). As a result, the organizational culture perspective provides a holistic view of organizations (Ott, 1989), acknowledges the role of the environment (Morgan, 1997; Oden, 1997) and has been linked to organizational effectiveness (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Oden, 1997; Rollins & Roberts, 1998). However, times exist where organizations decide to undergo radical organizational change.

To better understand the specific situation with Simon Fraser University athletics and other athletic departments face in the transition from one classification to another, we ask the specific question of how will the basic organizational assumptions within the culture of athletic departments, such as Simon Fraser, transform under a radical organizational change of a different NCAA classification? According to Schein (1992) basic assumptions are – like theories-in-use, tend to be non-confrontable and non-debatable, and hence are extremely difficult to change. To learn something new in this realm requires us to resurrect, reexamine, and possibly change some of the more stable...
portions of our cognitive structure – a process that Argyris and others have called “double-looped learning,” or “frame breaking” (Argyris et al., 1965; Bartunek, 1984). Slack and Parent (2006) state that focusing on organizational culture provides a unique and different approach to understanding patterns of action in sport organizations within the sport management literature.

This paper will examine organizational culture with a qualitative lens. Qualitative research is the preferred way to study organizational culture to uncover the basic assumptions within a particular organization. These basic assumptions provide the subconscious, almost thoughtless, guide for members to react to the environment (Ott, 1989). Ultimately, the basic assumptions provide members of an organizational culture with the mental maps that guide their perceptions and feelings within the culture (Schein, 1992; Schröder & Scribner, 2006).

In order to answer our research question, we use two different sources of information: newspapers and interviews. We first establish what universities in the US have changed NCAA classifications. We use the US Department of Education Equity in Athletics (EIA) website to find which schools have switched classification. From that, we will conduct a newspaper search to examine the dialogue surrounding a potential change. For CIS schools, we also conduct a newspaper search.

Second, we will conduct interviews with CIS and NCAA athletic directors, and other athletic officials, with the focus of organizational cultural shifts between classifications. For CIS, we will pay close attention to CIS universities that have had conversations about joining the NCAA. In addition to interviewing athletic officials of CIS universities, we will also interview athletic officials of US universities. From the results of the EIA, a random sample will be generated and interviews will be conducted with two NCAA institutions from each transitional level. For example, two institutions will be contacted for interviews that made the switch from NCAA Division III to NCAA Division II Questions will be asked of athletic directors in regards to the cultural significance (focused around assumptions) regarding the transition between divisions and the challenges the athletic departments faced when transitioning to another NCAA classification.

The results of this research will provide four direct benefits. First, from an organizational culture perspective, the results will uncover some challenges facing universities and athletic departments undergoing radical organizational change. Second, due to the highly institutionalized nature of college athletics particularly in the US (Washington, 2004), the results provide insight into the overall institution of college athletics and how the organizational change can improve the overall institution of intercollegiate athletics. Third, the research will expose future areas of research to study this radical organizational change that is occurring in universities throughout North America. Finally, with the integration of the organizational change literature, results will show management and decision makers what CIS institutions may encounter through such a radical organizational change of joining the NCAA.