A Conceptual Framework for University Identification

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Organizational identification (OID) has been acknowledged as an important construct in the field of organizational behavior. Multiple models of OID have shown its effects on individual satisfaction with the organization and the effectiveness of the organization (Mael and Tetrick, 1992; Mael and Ashforth, 1995; Lee, 1971). University and college settings have previously been used to test general OID models (Mael and Ashforth, 1992) but a framework to specifically understand current and past students' identification with their college or university has not been developed. The university and college setting is unique from other organizations because people are permanent members once they attend the school, unlike work or fan organizations where members can choose to completely stop their affiliation. This permanent membership will lead to a higher baseline level for OID and may also cause a more consistent, stable identification than seen in other OID settings.

This current study is a proposed conceptual framework designed to specifically explore the antecedents that contribute to OID in current and past students of universities and colleges. A specific type of OID, university identification (UID), is proposed. Three types of antecedents (individual, academic program, and athletic program) are posited based on past identification literature found in business and sport. For this presentation, the focus will be on athletic program antecedents while also giving a brief overview of the entire UID model.

Many of the individual and academic program antecedents were adapted from previous organizational behavior research conducted by Mael and Ashforth. Mael and Ashforth (1992) defined OID as “the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member” (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 103). The proposed definition of UID, "the bond and association one has with a university or college attended," is similar to previous OID definitions but necessary to better understand UID.

The first category, academic program antecedents, is composed of four constructs: (a) prestige of the academic programs, (b) academic distinctiveness, (c) interorganizational competition, and (d) intragroup organizational competition. March and Simon (1958) showed that the prestige of the organization positively affects OID. The authors suggested that individuals will be more identified with an organization they believe others hold in high regard. Additionally, the distinctiveness of the organization has been shown to positively influence OID. Oakes and Turner (1986) defined distinctiveness as the rarity or novelty of the organization. Moreover, interorganizational competition has positively influenced OID in past studies conducted in the university setting (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, and Sloan, 1976). Finally, intragroup organizational competition is theorized to negatively influence UID. Brown (1969) showed that competitions between groups within an organization had a negative influence on OID. Awareness of academic programs is proposed as a moderator between academic program antecedents and UID.

The second category theorized to effect UID is individual antecedents. The three proposed individual antecedents are (a) recency of membership, (b) satisfaction with education, and (c) relationships with other alumni. Recency of membership is proposed to have a positive effect on UID. Hall and Schneider (1972) demonstrated that people are identified higher with organizations in which they were most recently a member. The same study by Hall and Schneider (1972) showed that individuals are more highly identified with organizations that helped them achieve their goals (satisfaction with education). Additionally, relationships with other alumni are theorized to have a positive effect on UID. Muchinsky (1977) posited that employees who have positive relationships with others in the organization will have higher OID.

Athletic program antecedents is the third proposed category of UID. Limited research has been conducted into the role athletic programs have in OID with a university or college. Moreover, the limited research that has studied the relationship between athletic program success and support for the organization (Tucker, 2004) has only included monetary giving as the outcome variable and has failed to examine additional organizational consequence variables (telling others to attend the university, participating in alumni and general university activities, and public displays of identification).

Identification has been previously shown to be a strong predictor of support for sporting organizations. Heere and James (2007) suggested that sport marketers should focus on improving fans' team identification if they want to strengthen their loyalty to the team. Similarly, the Funk and James (2001) psychological continuum model of team identification showed that the relationship built between a fan and a team is governed by the strength and complexity of mental associations with the organization or sport.
This conceptual framework attempts to fill in the aforementioned gaps in the literature by integrating a number of previously established antecedents of team identification and measuring their effect on UID. The four athletic program antecedents proposed are (a) perceived success of athletic teams, (b) prestige of athletic program, (c) performance against rival schools, and (d) visibility of the athletic program.

Cialdini et al. (1976) introduced the idea of individuals basking in the reflected glory (BIRG) of an athletic program. Additionally, Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford (1986) theorized that organizational members would cut off reflected failure (CORF) with an unsuccessful group to protect their ego. Both BIRGing and CORFing are the theoretical basis for antecedents one and two. The difference in the two antecedents is the time frame. The prestige of an athletic program is a long-term measure while perceived success of an athletic program is a short-term feeling of accomplishment that is experienced and can quickly disappear. Additionally, performance against rival schools is theorized to affect UID. Luellen and Wann (2010) showed that identification in fans increases when shown a highlight video of a rival team. This suggests that people have a heightened sense of identification if their school is successful against a rival team. Lastly, the visibility of the athletic program is proposed to positively influence UID. The easier it is for alumni and former students to follow the university the higher their identification will be.

This proposed framework is a positive step to better understand UID. Additionally, the role athletics play in UID is another way in which athletic programs can underscore their importance in the university or college setting. A model specifically designed to improve support for the university would be of great use to any academic institution. Additionally, an identification model designed specifically for organizations with permanent members would be a new contribution to identification literature. Future research will focus on testing the proposed relationships and examining additional possible antecedents.