Examining Student-Athlete Identity Salience: A Large-Scale Survey Study

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The Problem and Objectives
College student-athletes face significant time and energy demands (Adler & Adler, 1987; Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Their dual roles have implications for their identities as students and athletes, or the meanings they attribute to themselves (Goffman, 1963). Identity salience - the likelihood of one identity (e.g. student or athlete) surfacing in a variety of situations (Stryker, 1968) - likely varies across student-athletes. This identity salience, in turn, could have consequences for student-athletes' behavior and well-being (Adler & Adler, 1987). There is limited research, however, on student-athlete identity salience, and an absence of large-scale, systematic studies. In particular, we lack an understanding of the relationship between identity salience and status, and situations in which athletes' identities are most salient. We address the following questions: what is the relationship between the status of a university (in terms of athletics and academics) and student-athlete identity salience? What is the relationship between an individual's status (e.g. as a top athletic performer or student) and student-athlete identity salience? And, how do situations of identity salience (when student-athletes feel most like a student or athlete) inform our understanding of the relationship between status and identity salience? To examine these questions, we administered a survey to student-athletes across universities that captures both quantitative and qualitative data; and collected archival, organizational data. The results of this study can inform university and athletic department policies and practices related to student-athletes.

Theoretical Background
The concept of identity is complex. It is shaped by politics, historical contexts, and social norms. Further, identities are multi-dimensional and often overlap (Rivera, Soderstrom, and Uzzi, 2010). For student-athletes, their identity as “students” may be more or less salient than their identity as “athletes.” There is limited research on student-athlete identity salience. One study by Yopyk and Prentice (2005) used experimental methods to prime athletes for certain identities and test the effect on task performance. Another early, qualitative study by Adler and Adler (1987) at a single university found that student-athletes’ experiences on teams and in classes influenced identity salience. For instance, a peer subculture that valued athletics over academics made the athlete role more salient for student-athletes. We lack knowledge of the connection between student-athlete identity salience and status, including the role of situation.

Our study investigates the relationship between identity salience and status, at both the individual and organizational levels. A student-athlete’s individual status, conferred by others, likely affects, or is related to, his or her identity salience. In particular, individuals strive for a positive self-concept, or how they view themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, it is likely that individuals will create and sustain personal identities that are aligned with areas where they have higher status. Based on this theory, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 1a: The higher a student-athlete’s student status, the greater his/her student identity salience.
Hypothesis 1b: The higher a student-athlete’s athlete status, the greater his/her athlete identity salience.

In terms of organizational status, studies indicate that identity salience is shaped the organizational environment (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Adler & Adler, 1987). The status of the organization, along different dimensions, may shape student-athlete identity salience through signalling organizational competency. In an effort to attain a positive self-concept, individuals who are members of the organization likely embrace identities associated with higher organizational status. We predict the following:

Hypothesis 2a: The higher the university’s academic status, the greater his/her student identity salience.
Hypothesis 2b: The higher the university’s athletic status, the greater his/her athlete identity salience.

Methods
We conducted a survey of collegiate student-athletes across 17 universities in the U.S., using Qualtrics survey software. The universities were selected to include representation across the five main collegiate athletic conferences. Our sample includes 1012 respondents (31% male, 69% female). We also collected archival data on each university to capture organizational status.

Measures
Student and athlete identity salience were measured using 6 Likert-style questions each that were adapted from existing scales (e.g. Athletic Identity Measurement Scale). For example, one item was: “Being a capable athlete [student] is central to who I am.” Individual academic status was measured by reported GPA. Individual athletic status was measured both by: 1) top performer and 2) leader on the team. Organizational academic status was measured using the U.S. News rankings. Organizational athletic status was measured using the Niche rankings. Situations of identity salience were assessed through open-ended questions (e.g. “When do you feel most like a student [athlete] outside of class [competition]?”).

Analysis
We tested our hypotheses using linear mixed-effects models adding university as a random effect. For hypotheses 1a and 2a, the DV was student identity salience and key predictors were GPA and academic ranking. To test hypotheses 1b and 2b, the DV was athlete identity salience and key predictors were leader, top performer, and athletic ranking. We included demographic controls (e.g., gender, race, family income, parents’ education, organizational size) in all models. Moving forward, we will inductively generate a coding scheme to analyze the qualitative data on situations of identity salience, and then code all responses. The codes will be converted into variables, and we will examine associations between these and status and identity measures using ANOVA. We will also conduct additional analyses of interaction effects.

Results and Discussion
Our current results support our hypotheses. The higher the respondent’s academic status (measured by GPA) and the higher the university’s academic status, the greater the student identity salience (H1a and H2a). We also found that the higher the athletic status (measured by leadership and top performer), the greater the athlete identity salience (H1b). These effects were all significant at the 0.05 level. We found moderate support for H2b: the higher the university’s athletic ranking, the greater the student-athlete’s athlete identity salience. This was marginally significant. We will use the qualitative data and resulting variables to inform our understanding of the connection between status and student-athlete identity salience. The findings of this study have the potential to inform policies regarding collegiate athletics and inclusiveness of student athletes.