COMMUNICATION PRIVACY MANAGEMENT IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS: EXPLORING PRIVACY DILEMMAS IN THE ATHLETIC/ACADEMIC ADVISOR STUDENT-ATHLETE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

Jason Thompson, Ph.D.
Department of Speech Communication Arts & Sciences
Brooklyn College - City University of New York

phone: 718.951.5225
e-mail: jthompson@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Research Problem

Over the course of a school year college student-athletes frequently interact with their advisor. It is common for student-athletes to develop a comfortable rapport with their advisor, and this is evident in the private information they disclose to the advisor pertaining to various issues (e.g., academic issues, athletic issues, personal issues) they regularly contend with. The purpose of this paper is to examine the uncertainties athletic/academic advisors encounter when managing private information disclosed to them from student-athletes. At times the decision about how to handle the information from student-athletes may not be simple because advisors find themselves juggling multiple relationships with student-athletes, parents, coaches, and others.

This research is significant for a couple of reasons. First, the decisions advisors make as they manage student-athletes’ private information have significant ramifications for student-athletes, the athletic department, and the institution as a whole. Therefore, a complete understanding of this issue is warranted. Second, this study has an applied nature as the information can be used to educate and inform future advisors who plan to work with college student-athletes. In this way, future advisors will be better informed about their position and will learn from the experiences described by other advisors as they have managed private information from student-athletes. Put differently, future advisors may glean some information from this study that helps them become more effective advisors.

This article would likely be pertinent to intercollegiate athletics department personnel. More specifically, the information would be useful to those in the athletics department who work directly in the area of advising student-athletes. All parties would want to read this study given that the department of athletics is usually interdependent. Put another way, the decisions made by a few affect the working environment of all. In the present study, the decisions and experiences of advisors affect the entire athletic department.

Issues

Few interpersonal relationships are more salient on college campuses than that between athletic/academic advisors and student-athletes. Student-athletes frequently meet with their advisors, and during these interactions, advisors listen to student-athletes’ concerns, offering advice which helps them navigate their academic and athletic journeys. Not surprisingly, over the course of these interactions, it is common for them to develop a very meaningful relationship given the tremendous influence of advisors. Many student-athletes feel comfortable with their advisor, and this is evident in the private information they disclose to the advisor concerning issues they regularly deal with.
Some of these issues include balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, struggling with learning disabilities, handling the close scrutiny of the media, and maintaining relationships with friends and family. These issues also encompass student-athletes having difficult relationships with their coaches, making them consider transferring to a different university.

When advisors receive private information from student-athletes pertaining to any of the aforementioned issues as confidants they may find themselves trying to decide what to reveal to others and what to conceal from others. Advisors face this decision because they maintain relationships with not only student-athletes, but also with coaches, parents, athletic administrators, and faculty members. For example, a student-athlete may disclose some private information to an advisor regarding the dissatisfaction the student-athlete has with the way the coach is treating him/her. Further, the dissatisfaction is causing the student-athlete to consider leaving the institution. Subsequent to receiving this disclosure, the advisor has to choose whether or not to disclose that information to the student-athlete’s coach as this situation patently affects the coach’s team. At first glance, it may appear this decision is relatively straightforward. However, this matter is substantially more complicated than it appears given that it is common for confidants to experience the difficulty of being caught in the middle between persons after receiving private information. The difficulty mainly lies in the dual loyalty conflicts experienced by the person caught in the middle. In the aforementioned example, subsequent receiving the private information from the student-athlete pertaining to being dissatisfied, the advisor is caught in the middle between the student-athlete and the coach. The advisor is caught in this position as he or she tries to decide what to do. The objective of this study is to learn more about the experiences of advisors as they navigate this process.

I was motivated to complete this research because many advisors have shared with me the dilemmas and discomfort they’ve experienced in the process of trying to decide what to do with information disclosed to them from student-athletes. They’ve shared being frustrated and without firm guidance in the midst of trying to decide what to do. As a result, I felt compelled to make better sense of the experience of advisors in effort to see if recommendations could be made to help make better their experience.

Summary

This study mainly found that advisors experienced different types of dilemmas while trying to decide how to manage private information disclosed to them from student-athletes. In other words, advisors were at times uncertain how to proceed when student-athletes disclosed to them information about certain matters. For example, advisors experienced dilemmas when student-athletes disclosed to them certain things pertaining to academic issues (e.g., student-athletes engaging in academic integrity issues such as cheating). Further, advisors experienced dilemmas when student-athletes disclosed to them about certain athletic issues (e.g., the desire to transfer to another institution and experiencing athletic injuries). Lastly, advisors experienced dilemmas when student-athletes disclosed to them about certain personal issues (e.g., personal health and wellness and family pressure).

When advisors received disclosures from student-athletes regarding the aforementioned range of issues, I discovered that the main reason they experienced uncertainty about how to proceed was based on being caught in the middle between the student-athletes and the another person (e.g., coach). Therefore, the advisor was trying to decide whether or not to reveal to someone else that which the student-athlete disclosed. This spurred a significant loyalty conflict on the part of the advisor. Interestingly, the advisors cited no clear guidelines that directed them how to proceed in each instance. Thus, experiencing dilemmas was a common occurrence.

Analysis

Based on the results of the present study, I argue that athletic organizations need to develop a complete set of unambiguous guidelines which are designed to help advisors avoid moments of being unsure how to manage private information disclosed to them from student-athletes. That’s the bottom line. This is critical because uncertainty can lead to dire consequences. In my study an advisor reported that he was unsure whether or not to inform a faculty member about a student-athlete who disclosed to him (i.e., advisor) about cheating on a class assignment. Also, in my study an advisor reported that he was unsure whether or not to inform athletic administrative personnel that a
student-athlete disclosed to him (i.e., advisor) that he was suffering from an injury yet felt compelled to compete despite the injury. I contend that both of these situations signal an enormous red flag in advising student-athletes. Advisors should never be unsure in either of these situations. Instead, advisors should possess an unequivocal set of administered guidelines that direct them in knowing the proper protocol for how to handle the various situations they may encounter. They also need to know how to proceed in the event that a situation they come across goes beyond the scope of the guidelines they were provided. If advisors are not given this critical information, then it is likely that some will continue to experience dilemmas when student-athletes disclose private information to them.

It is in the best interest of athletic organizations to help advisors avoid uncertainty while making important decisions in their work with student-athletes so that they can avoid inauspicious consequences. All advisors, particularly those who are novice advisors, need to be provided with these guidelines and also be properly trained. It is important that attention be called to this issue. My study raises awareness and encourages academic/athletic advising units to make sure an information management system is set in place for advisors as they interact with student-athletes.

**Discussions/Implications**

I argue that the findings of the present study, from an applied or translational research standpoint, can be translated into practice. Petronio (2007) argued that it is the responsibility of researchers to develop pragmatic and innovative ways to translate their research into practice and hence the research may benefit others outside of the confines of the researcher’s particular academic community. The findings of the present study will be used to produce the training manuals for training sessions aimed at providing novice and veteran advisors with useful strategies to handle difficult situations. With the proper training, novice and veteran advisors will be equipped with knowledge that will help them handle situations when they are experiencing a dilemma. The knowledge will give them guidance regarding how to handle the situation and make the proper decisions. They will be confident that the decisions they make are underwritten by departmental policies and procedures. Adequate training may also enable advisors to avert making ill-advised decisions which may result in damaging the student-athlete, the athletic department, or the university. This type of training is best designed to utilize case studies where the advisors are guided in learning how to handle dilemmas when student-athletes share with them certain private information, come to an understanding of the kind of privacy orientation the advisors might have, and analyze the implicit expectations that the college has for managing information of a personal nature.