*School of Hard Knocks***:**

Exploring how and to what extent universities and colleges in Ontario balance the reputational risks and benefits associated with contact intercollegiate sports

MCM Capstone Research Report
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Abstract

This exploratory, single-case study investigated how and to what extent leaders in Ontario colleges and universities balance the reputational benefits and risks of contact intercollegiate sports. This study investigated athletics' alignment with academic mission, how leaders respond to changes in stakeholder and societal values; and how leaders define, assess and respond to risk.

To achieve these objectives, the study reviewed theories regarding reputation and reputation management in the context of higher education. It extended these theories into the establishment of identity, organization-stakeholder relationships, assessment of risk, and threat mitigation in the context of intercollegiate athletics. The study examined multiple sources of data including in-depth interviews with athletic directors and deans, a survey to members of the Ontario College Athletic Association; and a content analysis of mission, vision and value statements of institutions represented in the study.

The study found that Ontario schools may be vulnerable to changing societal perceptions about risk in contact intercollegiate sports due to limited environmental scanning and limited engagement with stakeholders outside of higher education and athletics. The study may provide insight for academic institutions in Canada to assess academic and athletic value alignment and make changes if gaps are identified to protect reputation.

Keywords: *Canada, Ontario, colleges, universities, athletics, values, risk, contact sports, reputation, reputation management, concussion*

Introduction

Globalization and student and employee mobility have created a competitive environment for colleges and universities around the world (Steiner, Sundstrom, Sammalisto, 2013). In Canada, institutions are competing for tuition dollars, research funding, and corporate partnerships while government funding decreases (Chiose, 2015; Wolf, 2019). In Ontario, there are 45 colleges and universities (Miller, 2019). In this saturated industry, the need to be distinct and capitalize on a competitive advantage is essential. To this end, building a reputation that serves to distinguish an institution from its peers has become a critical priority (YoungAh, Hyojung & Cameron, 2018).

This study focused on one area of activity within Ontario Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), namely intercollegiate-athletics, and evaluated its impact on institutional reputation. While there are benefits for students and HEIs who participate in intercollegiate-athletics, there are also many challenges associated with sport in schools. These challenges include: rising costs (Hobson & Rich, 2015); student-athlete academic performance (Vogel, Kress & Jeske, 2019); widely-covered scandals and ethical violations (Thomason, 2018); as well as health risks (Miller & Jenette, 2013). In 2018, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) in the United States stated that these challenges have led "to the perception by many of an ever-widening gulf between athletic and academic cultures" (AGB, 2018, para 3). The AGB called on HEIs to take greater accountability for athletics with the same degree of responsibility as they would for finances, curriculum and strategic planning (AGB, 2018). This indicates acknowledgement from senior HEI leadership that sports culture needs to be critically examined as divergent academic and athletic values can be harmful to student wellness and institutional

integrity. The AGB stated, "The public is watching and failures in this area are adding to the erosion of trust in higher education" (AGB, 2018, para 4).

There is precedent for the revaluation of sports in HEIs. At its peak in 1948, 55 schools in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) participated in inter-collegiate boxing which was purported to be more popular than basketball at the time (Kane, 1959). To reduce harm to athletes, boxers wore head protection and padded gloves, and engaged in short rounds. Despite these measures, the sport drew criticism as barbaric and many felt it was ill-suited in universities (Moe, 2010). By 1952, support was waning. Only 29 schools had teams and the number continued to decline each year (Moe, 2010). Then, in 1960, in front of 10,000 fans, a boxer fell into a coma after suffering a blow while defending his NCAA championship. He died days later. Critics of inter-collegiate boxing rallied and the NCAA responded by cancelling its annual tournament (Moe, 2010).

Some inter-collegiate sports may be facing similar circumstances today. A 2018 study published in the journal, *Brain*, found that "when a teenager is hit in the head, his brain can begin to show signs, within days, of the kind damage associated with degenerative brain disease" (Reynolds, 2018).

In 2019, in the United States, over 300 former student-athletes were suing the NCAA and other conferences claiming "the organization(s) failed to protect them from the consequences of head injuries" (Keilman, 2019; Russo, 2019).

Although athletics may play a greater role in the identity and reputation of HEIs in the United States, Canadian schools are playing similar games and experiencing similar threats. In 2017, Bishops University in Quebec reached an out-of-court settlement with a former student-athlete the day before the trial commenced. The athlete's lawyer stated that if the case had

proceeded to court it would have been one of the largest personal-injury lawsuits in Canadian university history (Kestler-D'Amours, 2017).

Despite adopting certain measures to protect athletes, U Sports Canada, the national organization that governs athletics in Canadian universities, has been criticized for the lack of measurement and tracking of concussions (Atwood, 2018). When responding to the results of a Canadian-led study that established notable resistance from coaches and athletic trainers to remove athletes with suspected head injuries, the U Sports president stated, "I think that all coaches are motivated to win, that's their job…that's what they're supposed to do." (Atwood, 2018). These comments suggest a potential gap between stakeholder expectations and leadership perspective regarding priorities and responsibilities pertaining to student wellness.

In Ontario, in 2012, the provincial government attempted but failed to pass a bill to regulate youth concussion management. The following year, a 17-year-old girl from Ottawa, Ontario, Rowan Stringer, suffered a fatal concussion during a high school rugby match (Tator, 2018). As a result of this tragedy, in 2018, the Ontario Government enacted Rowan's Law, which brought youth concussion governance in Ontario to the standard that already existed in the United States. American regulations were in place largely in response to its highly-litigious environment (Hall, 2015).

The Bishops University lawsuit; the media criticism of U Sports; and the emergence of Rowan's Law suggest that the prevailing trends in the United States may be present in Canada. To understand this phenomenon, this study engaged leaders in Ontario who are responsible for Athletics in HEIs and examined how and to what extent higher education institutions in Ontario balance the reputational risks and benefits associated with contact intercollegiate sports.

Literature Review

Reputation

Scholars have yet to establish a consistent definition of organizational reputation (Walker, 2010). This lack of consensus is due to several interrelated concepts that emerge in the literature which are identity, image, and reputation (Clardy, 2012). Reputation is reflective of a relationship that exists between an organization and its stakeholders (Yang & Grunig, 2005). This relationship is developed by a collective system of subjective beliefs supported by members of different stakeholder groups (Bromley, 2002). These beliefs pertain to an organization's internal identity and external image; which, collectively, form reputation (Walker, 2010). Beliefs are influenced by the organization's visibility, shaped by media depictions (Deephouse, 2000), and are shared in the minds of stakeholders over time (Yang & Grunig, 2005). These collective perceptions, sometimes referred to as attitudes or evaluations (Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006), are important because they produce supportive behavior towards an organization; a quality that differentiates the organization from its competitors (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004).

Some scholars suggest that stakeholders perceive organizations differently based on their position relative to specific issues (Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006). In the context of this study, stakeholders' attitudes towards science and academia may influence perceptions of an HEIs responsibility to prevent sports-related brain-injuries in student-athletes (Dyck, Cluverius & Gerson, 2019). The stakeholder groups have a relationship with the HEI but, due to their variant issue-specific perspectives, may elicit different behavior towards the school. For this reason, Lewellyn (2002) suggests reputation is issue- and stakeholder-specific, and therefore

organizations may have more than one reputation. However, "each reputation represents the aggregate perception of all stakeholders for that specific issue" (Walker, 2010, p. 370).

Alsop (2004) maintains that reputation is comprised of several elements including ethics; social responsibility; financial performance; workplace culture; quality of products or services; leadership; and vision. Stakeholders positively evaluate organizations on these categories when the organization is visible, communicates with transparency, when it is distinct, when it maintains consistent relationships across stakeholder groups, and when it creates authentic emotional appeal (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). Collectively, organizations with the strongest reputations tend to communicate their internal values, image, and objectives "convincingly, sincerely, authentically and credibly to their stakeholder communities" (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004, p.95). This type of expressiveness helps create a shared understanding of the organization across all stakeholder groups. As stakeholders' ability to understand and identify with the organization increases, supportive behavior towards the organization also increases (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). Supportive behavior results in competitive advantages such as more resources, enhanced bargaining power, improved recruitment, more innovation, and second chances after crisis (O'Callaghan, 2007).

Logically, organizations that lack this expressiveness or are inconsistent in the values they communicate, may limit stakeholders' understanding and reduce supportive behavior towards the organization. Lack of understanding ultimately diminishes the integrity of stakeholder-organization relationships, weakening its reputation and resulting in an underperforming organization (O'Callaghan).

Reputation Management in Higher Education

HEI reputation has been defined as the aggregate impression that internal and external stakeholders hold of an institution over time (Chun, 2005; Alessandri, Yang & Kinsey, 2007). As the strategic behavior of HEIs is increasingly market-driven, the benefits of competitive differentiation through reputation are evident (Gibbs, Pashiardis & Ivy, 2008). When internal HEI identity is legitimatized and supported by external stakeholders in politics and society, institutions are rewarded with resources (Steiner, Sundstrom, Sammalisto, 2013). Further, studies have determined that university reputation is a key influence in student enrollment (Gray et al, 2003; Ivey, 2008; Sung & Yang, 2009; Abbott & Leslie, 2004; Lange, Lee & Dai, 2011), alumni contributions (Sung & Yang, 2008), and even graduate salaries (Lange, Lee & Dai, 2011).

To influence reputation, HEIs must strategically manage their actions to consistently meet stakeholders' expectations (Fombrun et al., 2000). To be successful, reputation management requires HEIs to identify and prioritize influential stakeholder relationships (Sinanovic & Pestek, 2016). Relationships with "individuals, groups, associations as well as public and private organizations that have a direct interest in the administration, and/or the economic or political affairs of the university" are all critical to HEI reputation (Wilson, 2009, p.11). Based on analysis of American universities, Kotler and Fox (1985) established a list of 16 stakeholder groups that are influential in HEIs. Accordingly, the internal stakeholders include,

> (1) current students, (2) administration and staff, (3) parents of students, (4) governing board members, (5) faculty, and (6) alumni. External publics include, (7) mass media, (8) government agencies, (9) the general public, (10) individual donors and foundations, (11) the business community, (12) prospective students, (13) suppliers, (14) competitors, (15) accreditation organizations, and (16) the local community (as cited in Wilson, 2009, p. 42)

Sinanovic and Pestek (2016) conclude key stakeholders are: "employees, students, the state, partners and society" (p.195). This illustrates that HEIs have a complex network of internal and external stakeholder relationships to consider when employing reputation management strategies.

In HEIs, stakeholder perceptions are reflective of teaching, research, and athletic programs (Alessandri et al., 2007) as well as the quality of university management, financial stability, social responsibility, and degree of concern for students (Sung & Yang, 2008). These perceptions are developed through personal or mediated experiences, or from information delivered by communication channels and symbols (Alessandri et al, 2007). This may include visual design, mission and value statements, and symbols related to core activities (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017). Cumulatively, these platforms communicate the values and norms of the organization and act as the "the lens through which the university communicates strategic activities" (Steiner et al., 2013, p. 412).

Schanz (2006) suggests that reputations are managed either by changing organizational behavior or through mediated stakeholder experiences facilitated by media or others. When evaluating the reputation management strategies of Nordic universities, Christen and Gornitzka (2017) found that HEIs, "place the highest premium on their moral reputation and being accountable as moral institutions to multiple audiences" (p.39). Universities also use moral symbols to reflect how both their academic and social programs, such as athletics, consistently align with ethical societal standards (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017). However, Alsop (2004) maintains that even organizations that have been mired in scandal attempt to appear ethical.

When considering the relationship between academics and athletics, some scholars suggest that HEIs can have conflicted or dual identities (Alessandri, 2007; Alessandri et al., 2007). Critics suggest intercollegiate sports can impede the teaching and research mission in

HEIs (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Mitten & Ross, 2014). Athletic identity has also been found to usurp academic identity as it has greater visibility and can be revenue-generating (Alessandri, 2007; Alessandri et al., 2007; Downes, 2017). For example, in the United States, HEIs with championship football or basketball teams experience an increase in student applications directly following a winning season (Toma & Cross, 1998). In addition to student recruitment, high-profile intercollegiate athletics can influence alumni relations, student life, academic reputation, government relations, and racial and gender diversity positioning (Toma & Cross, 1998).

Whereas Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) suggest inconsistent identity and values are a liability, Wæraas (2008) supports the phenomenon of multiple identities and further suggests that public organizations should embrace multiple identities instead of trying to promote certain values at the expense of others. Public organizations are established to "serve the public interest and are obligated to emphasize wider and often conflicting political, economic, and social values and interests" (Wæraas, 2008, p. 210).

Reputation Threat and Mitigation in Intercollegiate Sports

It has been established that reputation is founded in the actions and associations of an organization as perceived by its internal and external stakeholders (Schreiber, 2011). The benefits of a good reputation include attracting high quality employees, increased resources, and improved financial performance (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Hubbard, 2016). As organizations continue to meet stakeholders' expectations, over time the reputation becomes more resilient, creating a halo effect that can protect the organization when challenged (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Schreiber, 2011; Zavyalova et al., 2016). However, despite the resilience of positive reputation, it is vulnerable to revelation of past or current actions that are upsetting to stakeholders (Lange, Lee & Dai, 2011). O'Callaghan (2007) defines this phenomenon as

reputational risk, or the "threats that have the potential to undermine a corporation's ability to function as a commercial enterprise and impair its standing in the community" (p.109). These risks arise when there is a gap between stakeholder expectations and organizational behavior (Fombrun, Gardberg & Barnett, 2000) and can impact revenue, brand value, investor relationships, and employee recruitment and retention (Chordas, 2018). Further, the reputational decline in one organization can have an impact on an entire industry (Alsop, 2004).

Scholars suggest that organizations with a good reputation may be more vulnerable to reputational risk in that being known for something can lead to greater stakeholder expectations that may be difficult to maintain (Lange et al., 2011; Zavyalova et al, 2016). Further, stakeholders tend to intensely scrutinize well-known and well-liked organizations (Wade, Porac, Pollock, & Graffin, 2006). Non-profit organizations (NPOs), like public universities and colleges, are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon. Firstly, this is because stakeholders have a high degree of organizational identification with colleges and universities (Zavyalova et al, 2016), described as a cognitive, emotional and value-based bond (Ashford, Harrison & Corley, 2008) with the organization**.** Secondly, stakeholders expect NPO behavior to be ethical and honest as defined by the values and norms of the community (Sisco, 2012). In this regard, meeting stakeholders' expectations can be challenging as what is normative is in flux (Steiner et al., 2013). Steiner et al. (2013) state, "Collective ideas change as the information and influence at work in social networks change. Old information gives way to new information" (p.245). Therefore, universities and colleges must be particularly attuned to the shifts in stakeholder values. As reputation depends on the supportive behavior of stakeholders, every stakeholder group is a potential source of reputation risk (Fombrun et al., 2000). Should an NPO lose

stakeholder confidence, "they risk not just their reputations, but possibly their very existence" (Sisco, 2012, p. 4).

Coombs (2018) suggests that reputation is only threatened when a reprehensible action occurs and stakeholders perceive this act to be offensive. In the present era, digital connectivity enables like-minded stakeholder groups to emerge and connect quickly, united by a shared affinity or disagreement (Heffernan, 2012). If this happens, an organization may find itself in a state of crisis, defined as an event that threatens the expectancies of stakeholders and results in a decline in an organization's performance that generates negative outcomes (Coombs, 2015a). When encountering crisis, stakeholders will place the blame on the crisis situation itself or on the organization. If stakeholders perceive the organization to be at fault, it is likely to result in reputational decline (Coombs, 2018).

Organizations can lose stakeholder confidence by failing to meet environmental standards, demonstrating indifference or exploitation of internal stakeholders, showing insensitivity to diversity issues, corruption, or inadequate response to crisis (O'Callaghan, 2007). Other reputational threats include fraud, poor governance, litigation by stakeholders, unethical behavior, and poor policy or strategic decision-making (O'Callaghan, 2007). In order to prevent crisis, organizations must identify when their actions place stakeholders at risk or when stakeholders are dissatisfied with organizational operations or policies (Coombs, 2015b).

In HEIs, Downes (2017) identifies athletics as one of eight categories of potential scandal that can impact reputation. Historically, scholars suggested that, in terms of sports, stakeholders' perceptions were solely concerned with winning (Kruse, 1981), as made famous by the Vince Lombardi mantra: "winning isn't everything; it's the only thing" (p.273). However, in certain sports organizations, crises have been shown to have a negative impact on sponsorship and other

revenues (Wilson, Stavros & Westberg, 2008). Further, a spillover phenomenon can occur when

a seemingly isolated crisis affects other areas not directly involved with the crisis (Coombs,

2018, p. 16). Therefore, in HEIs, a crisis related to intercollegiate-sports, could impact the

reputation of the institution as a whole or even the entire higher education industry. Downes

(2017) posits that the negative impacts of crisis on HEI reputation can include reduced student

enrollment, increased student transfers, and reduced donations.

      In the field of organizational sports crisis, much scholarship centralizes on the role of

athletes and coaches and their impacts on sports organizations (Brown-Devlin, 2018). However,

"little research has examined reputational protection and crisis response strategies when the

organization itself is perceived to be at fault" (Brown-Devlin, 2018, p.45).

      Stakeholder expectation gaps can become reputational threats if stakeholders act against

the organization and generate negative media attention (Coombs, 2015b). In order to mitigate

reputational threats, organizations must identify warning signs and evaluate the likelihood and

degree of impact on the organization (Coombs, 2015b). Environmental scanning and responding

to stakeholder expectations regarding emerging social, political, or health trends is critical to

preventing reputational threats from evolving into crisis (Coombs, 2015b). This type of

monitoring can be done by consuming both traditional and online media news sources, journals,

case studies from other organizations, newsletters, websites, and public opinion polls (Coombs,

2015b). Stakeholder profiling and analyzing look-alike issues can also be used to gather

information and understand opinions (Larkin, 2003). If legal actions, intense media interest,

growing evidence-based data, political activism, regulatory proposals, and protagonists emerge,

then monitoring suggests a crisis may be imminent (Larkin, 2003).

Larkin (2003) suggests crisis mitigation response should be informed by analyzing an issue based on its degree of impact on operations relative to its likelihood of occurrence. Essential questions to pose include, is there a gap between performance and expectations? and does the organization deliver the values that it claims? (Larkin, 2003). If gaps are identified, a threat mitigation response is required to protect reputation (Coombs, 2015b).

However, it can be difficult for organizations and individual employees to respond as the required action may be contrary to the objectives or the culture of the organization (Heffernan, 2012). This may reflect employees' dislike for conflict and desire to conform, particularly to those of higher authority, which results in a diffusion of responsibility and limits actions (Larson, Triplett, Brant & Langenberg, 1979). In the United States, Burton and Welty Peachey (2014) found that there is "a level of distrust and fear on behalf of subordinates in athletic departments in regards to giving voice to concerns associated with the leadership of athletic directors" (p.8).

Perceptions of concussion-related injuries and response

Bell and Sanderson (2016) conducted sentiment analysis of online user comments of a 2015 *New York Times* op-ed article entitled "Don't Let Kids Play Football". The study concluded that media stories "may potentially indicate changing social values toward football that could influence the sustainability of the sport" (Bell & Sanderson, 2016, p.513). Further, a poll conducted by the University of Massachusetts Lowell Center for Public Opinion (2016) found that there is broad awareness that concussion-related injuries are caused by sports and are a significant public health risk. Additionally, the poll established that college sports organizations are perceived by the public as having done too little to address issues of concussion in sports (University of Massachusetts Lowell Center for Public Opinion, 2016). However, Cranmer and Sanderson (2018) found public perceptions to be more complex with some stakeholders

interpreting new policies designed to protect student-athletes from head-injuries as socially
progressive, while others believe the policies indicate a decline in masculinity and American
identity. Additional data suggests that although there is broad acceptance of the link between
sports concussions and brain injuries, stakeholder perceptions are polarized with a large subset of
the population experiencing disbelief in science and academia in general (Dyck, Cluverius &
Gerson, 2019). The study found that those with conservative political values were less inclined to
support the science behind sports-related brain-injury data than those with liberal political values
(Dyck, Cluverius & Gerson, 2019). Cranmer and Sanderson (2018) concluded that sports
organizations should prepare for resistance if implementing new policies and adopt
communication strategies to manage stakeholders' expectations.

      In intercollegiate-sports, the question as to who conducts stakeholder analysis to mitigate
reputational threat is unclear. Roby (2014) suggests that athletic directors must act as the moral
managers of intercollegiate athletics. Athletics directors are moral managers when they promote
ethical positions through communication, role modeling, and holding others accountable for
ethical conduct (Brown & Trevino, 2006) This position must be reflected in interactions with
stakeholders, recruitment of coaches, and in resource allocation (Burton & Welty Peachey,
2014). Danylchuk and Chelladurai's (1999) study analyzing the managerial responsibilities in
intercollegiate-athletics found that athletic directors in Canadian HEIs spent the most time
handling disturbances, and spent the least amount of time information-seeking, engaging in
public relations, and disseminating information. A study examining the role of VP of student
affairs and deans of students noted that priorities such as student advocacy and stakeholder
relationship management were components of the position, but only so far as dictated by the
priorities of the HEI president (Bass, 2016).

Given the context of how athletics is leveraged to support HEIs and the perceived gap between athletic and academic values, as well as the literature that suggests reputation will decline if organizations do not respond to changing stakeholder perceptions, this study explored **how and to what extent HEI athletic leaders in Ontario balance the reputational risks and benefits associated with student participation in contact intercollegiate sports.**

Research Problem

In the context described above, this study explored **how and to what extent HEI athletic leaders in Ontario balance the reputational risks and benefits associated with student participation in contact intercollegiate-sports.** This exploratory study (Yin, 2014), examined the perspectives of institutional leaders within Ontario, a context in which few investigations have been conducted. The results of this study may inspire discussion about how HEIs can mitigate the perceived threats to reputation and may lead to a useful framework to guide HEIs in their reputation building and reputation protection activities.

Research Questions

In order to examine how and to what extent HEI athletic leaders in Ontario balance the reputational benefits and risks associated with student participation in contact intercollegiate-sports, this study focused on the following elements: institutional identity, stakeholder expectations, and risk assessment and response.

RQ1: How and to what extent does intercollegiate-sports serve the mission of the HEI and inform its identity.

This question examined the behavioural alignment in HEIs, as reflected in the activities and symbols of the athletics department, compared to the school's stated values and strategic goals. This question sought to determine how athletics informs the identity of the HEI and

whether contact sports serve to create a strategic advantage for the institution. As suggested by the AGB, this question sought to identify any perceived gaps between academic and athletic values.

RQ2: How and to what extent are HEI athletic leaders in Ontario responding to stakeholder and societal expectations regarding the value and risk in contact intercollegiate sports.

This question investigated how leaders gather information about issues in athletics; what listening tools or methods were adopted to understand changes to stakeholder values and opinions; and how leaders respond to this information.

RQ3: How and to what extent do leaders define, assess, and measure risk?

This question investigated the frameworks or guidelines leaders use to asses risk and the variables that inform risk response to perceived reputational threats. This question sought to understand the factors that influence decision-making and criteria required to act upon risk identification.

Methodology

Case Study Method

This exploratory, single-case study (Yin 2014) examined theories related to reputation management, risk assessment and analysis as it applied to higher education and intercollegiate athletics in Ontario. Yin (2014) states that the case study is the optimal method to understand "how" and "why" questions about a "contemporary phenomenon" (p.16) in which the researcher has little control over behavioural events. This study explored 'how' and 'why' questions regarding leaders' understanding of stakeholder analysis and the strategies adopted to mitigate risk and protect reputation. Critics of the case study method question the precision and

generalizability of the method. Yin (2014) argues that when research is methodical; conducted with care; does not allow "equivocal evidence to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions" (p. 20) and attempts to build general analysis, the method is successful.

The author, aware of possible bias, reflected on the reasons for conducting the study and determined it was not to praise or criticize her employer or the HEI industry but to simply better understand its decision-making strategies and gain genuine knowledge of how institutions can protect themselves from potential harm so that these strategies can be improved and/or replicated in the future. Before data collection commenced, the study gained approval from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB). Upon approval from the MREB, the author gained approval from all research ethics boards represented by interview participants.

The author intended to conduct the study ethically and avoid bias. The author sought to understand the theories and issues related to the study by conducting a thorough literature review. She was open to contrary evidence and reported findings truthfully and with academic integrity. The author acknowledges an element of bias does exist as the interview candidates were self-selected by the researcher.

Data Collection Procedures

Case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence that are triangulated to create construct validity (Yin, 2014). Accordingly, this study relied on in-depth interviews, a survey questionnaire, and archival records and documents to develop "converging lines of inquiry" to achieve accurate and convincing results (Yin, 2014, p.120).

The author developed an electronic survey that was distributed to the 27 members of the Ontario College Athletics Association (OCAA). The anonymous survey was sent by email to the athletic directors of colleges in Ontario and was distributed directly from the executive director

of the OCAA. In total, 5 respondents completed the 11-question survey and reflects 18.5% ($n =$ 5) of all athletic directors in Ontario colleges.

The author conducted nine, in-depth interviews with directors of athletics, and deans responsible for student wellness from seven universities and colleges in Ontario. Five women and four men were interviewed, which included both male and female deans and directors; with two men and three women representing universities, and two women and two men representing colleges.

Interviewees were identified through convenience sampling; based on the author's professional network and through HEI websites. Due to the expansive nature of the territory identified for analysis (all of Ontario), interviews were conducted by telephone. During each interview, the author took notes, and recorded the discussions which were later transcribed. The interview subjects were given two sample questions in advance of the interview. Consent, confidentiality and anonymity terms were established prior to confirming each interview and were reviewed before interviews commenced. These interviews proceeded with an awareness of reflexivity (Ying, 2014). Despite adopting a friendly tone during the interviews, this awareness reduced the likelihood of unintentionally influencing interviewees' responses. The researcher was also aware that the data provided by interviewees may have been informed by their level of recall and accuracy of articulation (Yin, 2014).

Further, the author collected the mission, vision, and value statements of the institutions represented in the interview population. These statements were publicly available and were accessed through the schools' websites. The collected content was segmented into charts and organized thematically for critical analysis. The author recognizes that sources of this nature are

subject to bias due to possible inaccuracy. As stated in Yin (2014), these sources were used primarily to corroborate or disprove other sources.

Data Analysis Techniques

As stated in Yin (2014), the researcher began by "play(ing) with the data and search(ing) for promising patterns, insights and concepts" with the goal of identifying areas to analyze (p.132). The next strategy was to use analytic priorities that were established in the theoretical propositions of the case study's literature review to identify patterns and insight (Yin, 2014). The researcher also "examine(d) plausible rival explanations" for any research results (Yin, 2014, p.140).

Yin describes five analytic techniques that are applicable to case study analysis. This study adopted a pattern matching method identified by Yin as the explanation-building technique (2014). The basis of this method is to assess data by forming an explanation about the case which will "reflect some theoretically significant propositions" (Yin, 2014, p.147). This method was useful to examine how leaders in HEIs balance the reputational risks and benefits of contact intercollegiate sports.

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Results

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Three types of data were collected in this study. The author conducted nine, 30 to 60-minute telephone interviews with athletic directors and deans responsible for student wellness from seven universities and colleges in Ontario.

The interview subjects represented large and mid-sized universities, and large and small colleges. Gender was equally represented with five women and four men interviewed, which included both male and female deans and directors. There was gender parity across institution-

types with two men and three women representing universities, and two women and two men representing colleges.

Women leading athletics

Women led the two largest organizations represented in the study. Within the interview population, these two leaders were the most critical of the policies, stakeholders, and culture discussed in the study. Compared to the other participants, these women described the most strategic approach to issues management with the most rigorous information-collection frameworks and most time spent on critical analysis. Their responses often stood apart from others in the interview population.

This data may suggest that female leaders bring a more critical lens to issues management in athletics. Or, it may suggest that larger organizations spend more time managing reputation and take a more strategic approach to safeguard the institution. Further, larger institutions may have more resources and can afford to invest in strategic roles. In this study, participants from smaller institutions were supported by fewer staff members and appeared to spend more time reacting to issues versus collecting information and planning.

Directors vs. Deans

Deans applied a broad lens when assessing student wellness. Their responses reflected responsibility to all students, not just student-athletes. They often highlighted the special services available to athletes and described this group as well supported by the institution compared to the general student population. Deans were not knowledgeable about specific policies in athletics but expressed confidence in athletics staff to manage issues.

Other Data Sources

In addition to interviews, the author conducted an electronic survey that was distributed to the 27 members of the Ontario College of Athletics Association (OCAA). The anonymous survey was sent by email to the athletic directors of colleges in Ontario and was distributed directly from the executive director of the OCAA. In total, five respondents completed the 11-question survey which reflects 18.5% ($n = 5$) of all athletic directors in Ontario colleges.

Further, the author collected the mission, vision, and value statements of the institutions represented in the interview population. These statements were publicly available and were accessed through the schools' websites. The collected content was segmented into charts for critical analysis.

The three research questions were used to segment the data sources. Each research question was subdivided by relevant concepts including identity, risk, stakeholders, values, assessment, and response. The themes and keywords were identified based on their prevalence in the corresponding literature review and the frequency in which they appeared in the collected data. Once all data sources were evaluated and organized, keywords and concepts were established. By analyzing the highlighted content, patterns emerged and are described in the following research questions.

RQ1: How and to what extent does intercollegiate-sports serve the mission of the HEI and inform its identity?

To understand how varsity athletics supports the mission and contributes to identity in HEIs, it was essential to establish common principles of identity across the institutions represented.

Initial analysis of the mission, vision and values statements established three common components which were: principles, actions, and outcomes. After arranging content into these

categories, further analysis identified six common variables: distinction, collaboration, ethics, excellence, innovation, and scholarship (Figure 1).

Themes related to ethics, collaboration, innovation, and scholarship appeared in statements from all institutions and can be considered universal identity themes in this study. Distinction was absent from the statements of two schools – the smallest university and the smallest college represented in the study. Therefore, the size of an institution may indicate how broadly it aspires to be known. Excellence appeared in five of the seven schools' statements and was categorized as both a principle and an outcome in some cases.

Figure 1:

Content Analysis of Mission, Vision and Values Statements
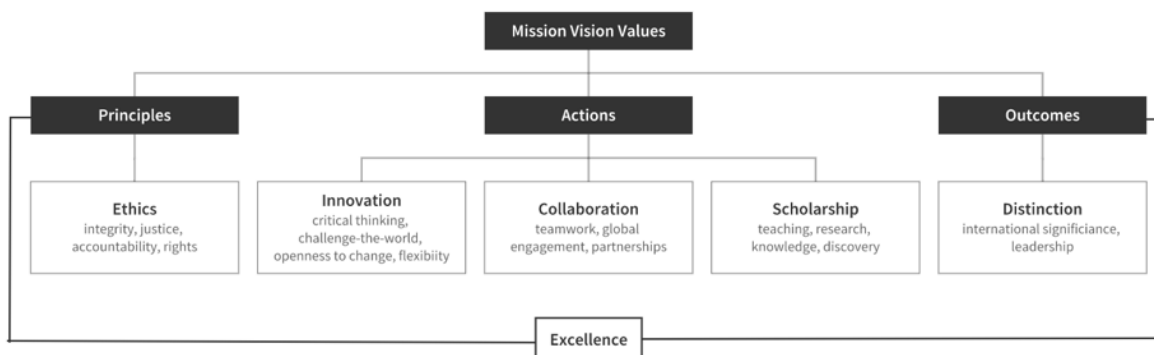
Collectively, these concepts form the identity pillars of all the institutions represented and act as a framework to compare perceptions reflected by interviewees and survey participants.

Athletics' Alignment with Academics

Once the identity pillars were established, it was important to understand how closely athletic programs aligned with these pillars. Survey data showed 80% (n=4) of respondents believe academic values and athletics values are aligned. However, interviewees reported that organizational structure; quality of relationships; and proximity to academic programing were

variables that influenced the degree of alignment. Coaching staff's ability to reflect institutional objectives in their recruitment practices and in their teams' cultures also contributed to the degree of alignment. Tension between academics and athletics was reported when relational gaps existed, with some stating certain academic faculty members, "see athletics as an interrupter and not an enhancer of education" (Participant D, personal communication, February 2020).

Relational gaps were reported to decrease when institutional leadership changed; when athletics and academic programs were in close proximity; and when representatives from athletics were given a voice in the development of mission statements for the institution.

The results suggest there are several factors that can be manipulated to enhance connection between athletics and academics. Specifically, when athletics is in close proximity or situated within an academic faculty; this had the greatest impact on value alignment. The ability of school leadership to support and articulate connections between academics and athletics was also important. Ensuring coaches understand school values and actively incorporate those values into every stage of their coaching practice, was also important to alignment.

Athletics' Influence on External Perceptions

To understand the role of contact intercollegiate sports in HEI reputation, this study first sought to identify how and to what extent athletics' impacts perceptions about HEIs. Accordingly, 80% (n=4) of survey respondents believed athletics influences public perceptions about their schools. The data in Table 2 shows that student recruitment and alumni relations are reputational elements that are heavily influenced by athletics, whereas academic reputation and government relations were significantly less influenced by athletics.

Table 2

Degree of impact on elements of school

| Factors	Degree of influence
Student Recruitment	4.0
Alumni Relations	3.8
Academic Reputation	3.0
Government Relations	2.6

Note. n=5. In order to establish a total point score for each element, respondents assigned a value to each response between 1 = *No Impact* and 5 = *Significant Impact*. Scores were then divided by number of respondents (n) to establish a mean for each element.

External Forces that Impact Athletics

Once it was established that athletics influences elements that shape HEI reputation, it was important to understand what variables inform how athletics operates. Accordingly, interview subjects confirmed that the nature of the competitive HEI environment affects decision-making and activities in varsity athletics.

Figure 2 summarizes how the competitive market influences activities. For example, it was reported that this phenomenon creates a need for athletics to be attuned to financial objectives. Specifically, it creates pressure to generate revenue; to ensure activities have sufficient return-on-investment; to create financial efficiencies; to identify business and community partnerships; and to treat stakeholders like customers. One participant described the pressure to emulate NCAA and professional sports experiences in order to keep stakeholders interested in her school's programing. Several participants described how staff time is spent focused on these monetary concerns, which means staff are spending less time on other objectives. Others noted that HEIs leverage athletics as a marketing tool to drive student recruitment because its builds an attractive narrative about student experience.

Figure 2

How the competitive market of HEIs influences athletics
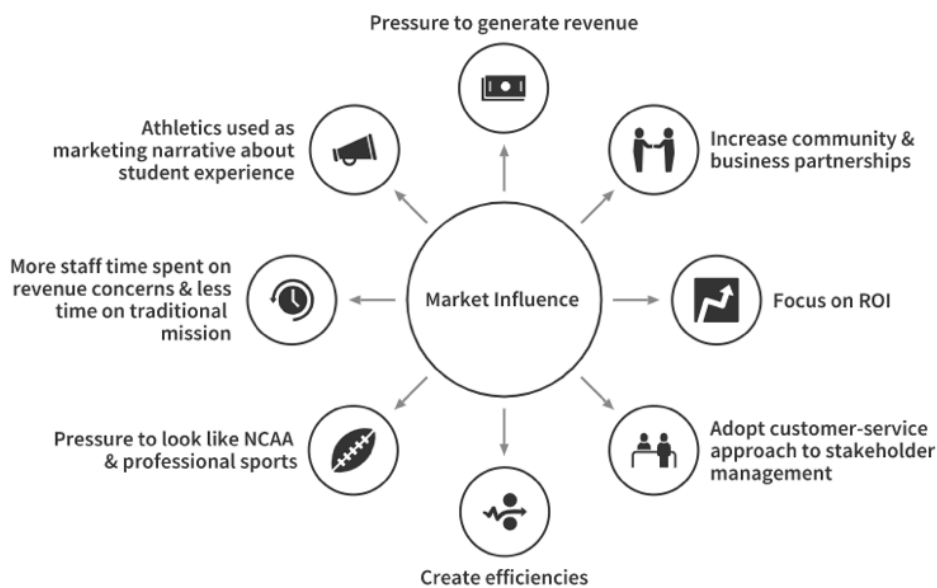
This data suggests that competitive market pressure in the broader HEI environment has a direct impact on how athletics operates. Further, as participants reported that curricular programs did not experience the same financial pressure as athletic programs, this data provides insights as to why athletic and academic values may be diverging.

How Stakeholders Influence Athletics

In addition to market influence, the study sought to establish other factors that impact athletics. Participants were asked to identify key stakeholders that influence decision-making. Data presented in Table 3 shows that internal stakeholders such as student-athletes, school leadership, and athletic associations were perceived to be the most influential in program decision-making in colleges. Stakeholders, external to sports, such as academic faculty, media, and the government had limited influence.

Table 3

Influence of Stakeholders on Decision-making (in Colleges)
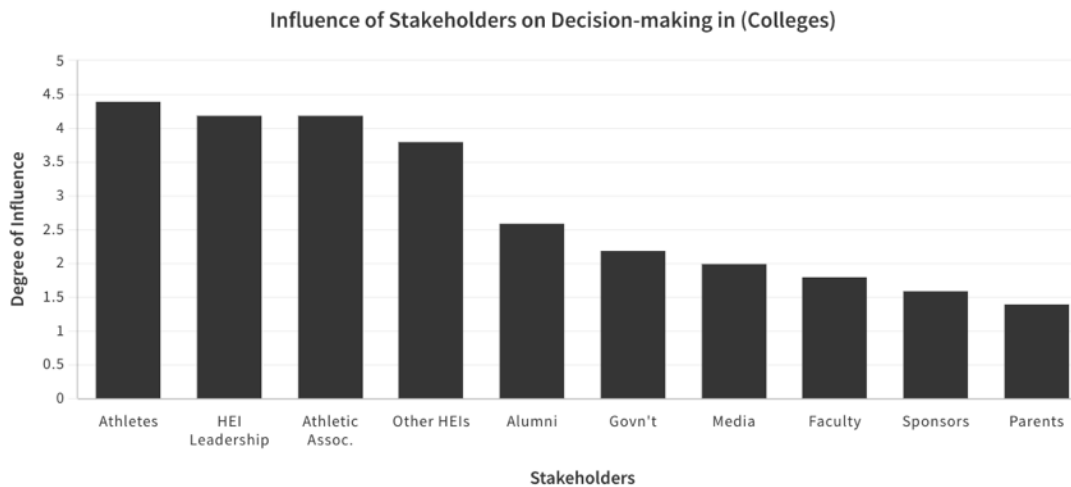
Note. n=5. In order to establish a total point score for each stakeholder, respondents assigned a value to each response between 1 = *least influential* and 5 = *most influential*. Scores were then divided by number of respondents (n) to establish a mean for each stakeholder.

Once key stakeholders were established, it was important to understand the goals or values that they advocate for as these priorities will be reflected in athletics' decision-making. The data in Figure 3 suggests that athletic leaders are influenced by many stakeholders who, often, have vastly different priorities. For example, students are focused on personal development whereas coaches are focused on performance and how much attention the school gives their sport. Absent from coaches' priorities was promoting HEI values or meeting students' personal needs. Analysis of just these two stakeholders illustrates the challenge participants face when trying to manage issues in a way that meets stakeholders' needs and maintains alignment with identity pillars.

Participants from colleges noted that alumni and sponsors were not as influential as they perceive them to be in the university environment; however, college participants said the influence of community partners was emerging and some forecasted that this influence will likely grow. This data corelates to earlier findings regarding the influence of market forces and

acknowledges the growing influence of financial considerations in both university and college athletics.

Further, with the exception of Government, the stakeholders cited in Figure 3 are primarily internal to the HEI. This trend aligns with data in Table 3 and with Participant E's observation that "varsity sports is very insular and there's not a ton of influence from the outside" (personal correspondence, February 2020).

Overall, the data in Figure 3 illustrates that participants listen to nine stakeholders with often varied priorities. Despite the large number, most stakeholders are categorized as internal to the organization. Therefore, although participants report being attentive to a broad range of stakeholder needs, there is limited consideration for external views. This may indicate athletic leaders are making decisions without considering the values of those outside their organization or outside athletics who may represent influential societal views. This may leave leaders vulnerable or ill-prepared should they face criticism from those outside the organization.

Figure 3

Influential Stakeholders and Corresponding Priorities (Colleges and Universities)

Stakeholders	Priorities
Student-Athletes	Personal wellbeing; Lived-experience aligns with goals
Coaches	Sport-specific performance, publicity, social media attention, degree of relevancy on campus
Department Staff	Human resources, financial, coach and athlete needs, sports regulations
Alumni	Sport-specific publicity and degree of relevancy on campus
Health Service Providers	Physical and mental wellness of athletes, data collection, sport policy
Donors/Sponsors	Sport specific, how investment impacts programs of personal interest
Government	Legislative change
Other HEI Leaders	Student wellness, institution management
Student Government	Budget approval

RQ2: How and to what extent are HEI athletic leaders responding to stakeholder and societal expectations regarding the value and risk in contact intercollegiate sports?

In order to understand how participants respond to stakeholder and societal expectations, it was important to assess what information they use that indicates a response is required. Accordingly, the study sought to understand what signals and environmental warnings were important to participants, how they collected and analyzed that information, and how and when that information translated into a response.

Environmental Scanning

To begin, survey respondents reflected on the methods used to conduct environmental scanning. When asked, "How do you stay current with emerging issues and trends (political, social, health-related) regarding intercollegiate athletics", 100% (n=5) reported this is done by listening to stakeholders, following the news, and through information from athletic associations. Other tools including following social media and conducting polls or surveys were moderately used by respondents. Only 20% (n=1) used scientific literature or listening to political leaders as an environmental scanning aid (Figure 4).

The data in Figure 4 illustrates that few respondents are using the full scope of environmental assessment tools or techniques. This is limiting when assessing public perceptions, as new scientific findings and social media conversations can quickly influence public perceptions about risk. As a result, athletic leaders may miss important trends or issues in their scanning practice and may be surprised or vulnerable to untracked changes in their environment.

Figure 4

Environmental Scanning Techniques Adopted by Athletics Leaders in Colleges
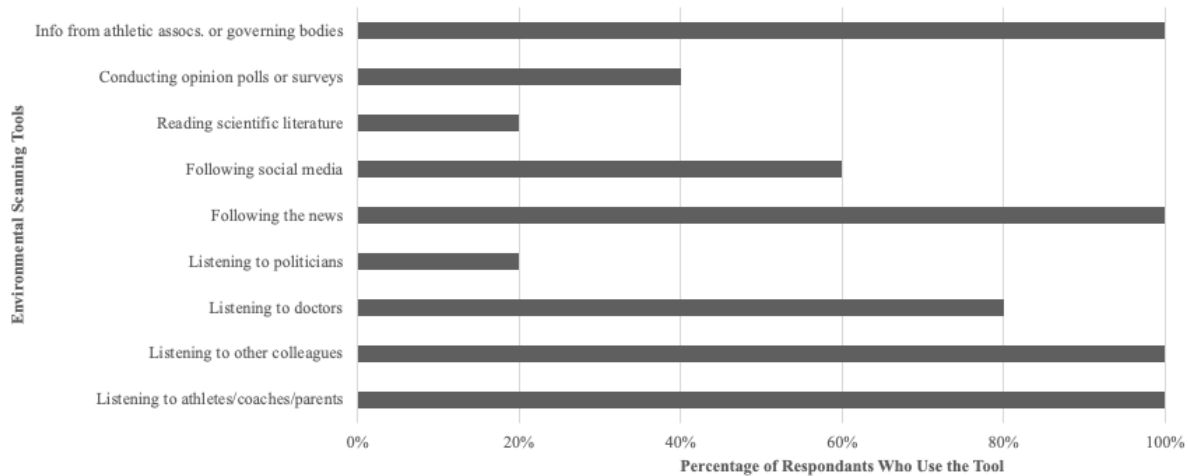

Stakeholder Assessment

In addition to environmental scanning, athletic leaders must listen to and assess the needs of key stakeholders in order to effectively respond to risk (Murray, 2003). Accordingly, survey respondents were asked to identify how they know when stakeholders are dissatisfied with their program's operations or policies (Figure 5). Observing a decline in participation, conducting discussions with HEI leadership, and direct reporting were the predominant methods identified.

These methods require problems to manifest in order to be observed. For example, on a spectrum of activity indicating perceptions of risk, a decline in participation might manifest at the latter end of an issue cycle and could cause significant disruption to programs. Whereas athletic leaders may be attuned to this pending change earlier if they conducted regular opinion polling which would capture and track a shift in stakeholder sentiment much earlier than an observable decline in participation.

The data is Figure 5 demonstrates that participants rely on methods that require stakeholders to *show* them that they are dissatisfied, and do not readily use methods that actively seek information from stakeholders, or distil information from sources in order to anticipate change. By neglecting methods that identify changes early in an issue cycle, leaders may leave themselves vulnerable to unexpected change and may have less time, resources, and fewer options to respond in order to mitigate problems.

Figure 5

Methods of Identifying Stakeholder Dissatisfaction (Colleges)
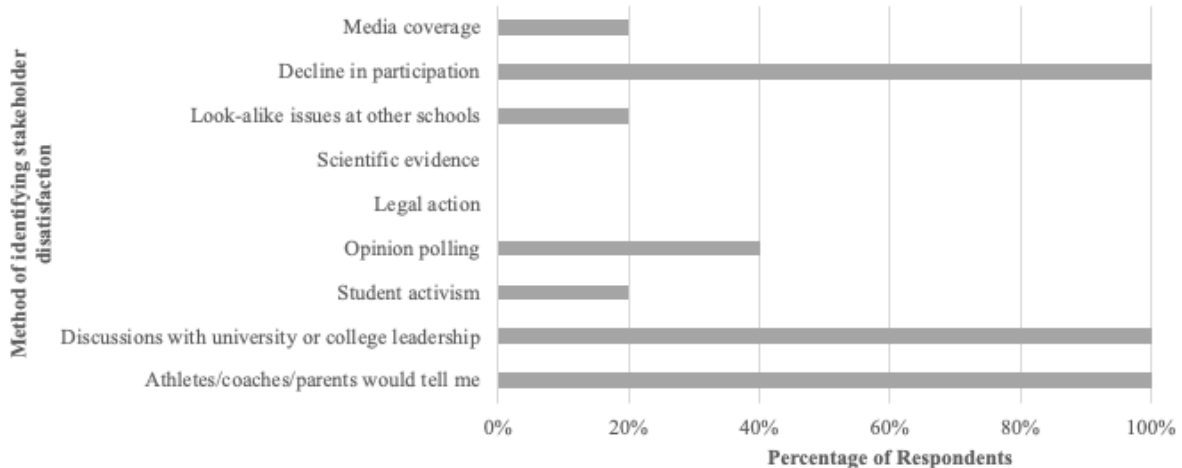
Information in Figure 5 was consistent with interview data that showed coaches, department staff, and alumni reported problems to directors when they were dissatisfied (Figure 6). Directors also relied on formal reporting structures such as meetings and surveys to identify dissatisfaction. Many participants reflected the sentiment of Participant G who stated, "If someone's not happy, I'll know about it" (personal communication, February 2020). This suggests a passive approach to assessment as participants depend on stakeholders to actively come forward with issues. As interview participants spend a lot of time dealing with problems directly reported by stakeholders, it may create a perception that they are spending sufficient

time on issue assessment. Also, it may create a perception that they are managing all active issues, when in fact they are only dealing with the most pressing problems as presented by aggravated stakeholders.

Many participants reported that as long as they listen to stakeholders' concerns, take their issues seriously and respond quickly, then the program develops a reputation for responsiveness and people trust them to find appropriate solutions. Several participants mentioned that their programs were rarely the subject of negative media attention, or were purposeful to avoid media when stakeholder issues arise, which was perceived as an example of how well problems are resolved.

These findings indicate that leaders feel confident in their responsiveness to problems. However, the commentary about media involvement may imply that leaders believe they have failed in their responsiveness only when stakeholder dissatisfaction results in negative media coverage.

Figure 6 summarizes the methods leaders use to identify stakeholder dissatisfaction. Although leaders use proactive methods of information-seeking, such as surveys, when evaluating student-athletes, most leaders rely on stakeholders to report problems directly.

Figure 6

How interview participants identify stakeholder dissatisfaction

Stakeholders	Method
Student-Athletes	Surveys, meetings, in-person reviews with athlete services, team meetings, self-reporting, athlete services reporting, coaches reporting
Coaches	Report directly to the director, internal reporting structures
Department Staff	Annual department review, monitoring social media, internal reporting
Alumni, Sponsors, Community	Report Directly to the director, post on social media, internal reporting structures

Collectively, the data indicates participants use limited environmental scanning, rely on passive methods of stakeholder assessment, and measure success based on ability to deal with a high volume of issues and keeping those issues out of the media.

Student-Athletes and Coaches

Despite using proactive methods to collect information about athletes, many participants acknowledged that understanding them posed a challenge as, "generally, student-athletes try to solve their problems in an insular way, within the team. They seem to be less likely to reach out for help outside of athletics" (Participant E, personal communication, February 2020). While at the same time there was a belief that, "if you don't hear from stakeholders, it's because they're happy. And if you do hear from them, it's because they're unhappy" (Participant A, personal communication, March 2020). Therefore, there may be a contradiction in that athletes are reluctant to report problems, which leads staff to believe that problems do not exist.

Many noted that coaches played an important role in reporting problems and held significant responsibility for student-athlete wellness. Participant A said, "Community coaches are beginning to think, 'can I take on all this responsibility'? I think that's a worry" (personal communication, March 2020). Another noted that while "coaches are critical to athlete protection and critical to athletes' focus on academics, they're also the biggest risk" (Participant H, personal communication, February 2020). Participants were equally worried about losing coaches due to increasing responsibility levels as they were concerned with the potential negative impact of coaches' behavior.

Although there were many policies that govern athlete and staff behavior, there was less consistency in how coaches were managed. One participant said that their program is "highly attuned to the quality and training of coaches so that they are in a position to be transformational in nature" for athletes (Participant E, personal communication, February 2020). Conversely, another participant described limited scrutiny on coaches in stating "if you have a coach that hasn't been to a coaches' meeting in a couple of years, that's a red flag." (Participant F, personal communication, February 2020). Cumulatively, results indicate coaches are valued and deemed to be critical to the success of programs but show inconsistencies in how they are governed and in the threshold for acceptable conduct.

Warning Signs

In addition to environmental scanning and stakeholder assessment, interview participants reflected on the warning signs they look for that indicate a problem is emerging (Figure 7). Many respondents said information from student-athletes was important. Participant C said that her school collects annual, anonymous student-athlete feedback that is carefully reviewed "for warning signs that something isn't right in the program… it might be about the

coach or facilities… those evaluation tools help you stay ahead of those things" (personal communication, February 2020). However, a participant said, "there's a stigma in sport that athletes don't want to ask for help. And they can be very good at masking what's going on in their life. It's something we struggle with and discuss all the time" (Participant B, personal communication, February 2020). This data suggests a pattern in that athletes are critical to program success but they are difficult to assess.

High-risk Sports

When discussing warning signs, some participants discussed sports that were perceived to pose a particularly high risk of injury to students. Although other sports were mentioned, varsity football was thematic in these discussions; however, perspectives regarding the severity of risk were varied. Participant C said,

> I'm always very wary about football. This isn't just me. I've voiced this to senior members of our faculty and the university… I really question whether as a post-secondary institution we should have football. It's not a sport where you can modify the rules to take out the danger and we know the potential for lifelong injury is there…. For me, that's one of those structural cultural flags that's always up. (Participant C, personal communication, February 2020)

This was the only time a leader acknowledged the institutional risk associated with this sport. Participant C was the only one who described raising these concerns with academic faculty and senior leadership. Despite discussing how football creates risk for students and the institution, Participant C said stakeholders' values superseded that risk. She said her authority to influence policy was limited by the interest in and support for football.

> I feel we shouldn't be in the business of football. But there's not appetite to cancel football here on our own. It's one of those things where you put as much support around it as you can to make sure everyone is as safe as possible and just do our best to make it work. (Participant C, personal communication, February 2020)

For participants who had a football program, several hypothesized on the future of the sport. None of the participants foresaw an environment in which the school proactively removed football due to perceived risks. Most said participation-decline would be the catalyst for its removal. Participation numbers were described as a clear, unbiased metric to assess the sport's viability.

Another participant said their community of football supporters benefits the school because they are highly engaged and highly visible. He hypothesized that removing football would impact the degree of support from this community and negatively impact the school overall. Participant C said, although she's concerned about the risk football poses, she did not foresee a cultural shift that would end football in her school. She did suggest that if all the research-intensive institutions coordinated their approach, perhaps a change would occur. This statement may indicate that research-intensive universities have a greater responsibility and authority to address this problem because they are actively building data about risk exposure and are considered experts in the field. It may also suggest that research-intensive schools are exposed to the greatest reputational risk as the research they develop and the sports they engage in are in conflict with each other.

Traditional & Social Media

Beyond sport-specific risks, many respondents said they monitor traditional media and social media to identify warning signs. These platforms helped make assessments at the macro level and distill them to the micro-level. For example, a participant said that, currently, media activity shows that the maltreatment of student-athletes is a prevalent concern.

> Because of what's happening at Guelph and Queens and other universities, people
> are reading about what's happened recently to athletes, and that might bring up
> some emotions about incidents that have occurred in the past. I talk to my staff

about being attuned to that and picking it up quickly. We're hypersensitive to it
right now. (Participant C, personal communication, February 2020)

This data shows that some athletics leaders use social media to identify issues and
anticipate future actions of stakeholders.

Insular Sports Culture

When reflecting on warning signs, many participants said athletics' culture can be a
problem. Specifically, the insular approach to problem-solving, traditionally adopted in athletics,
can exacerbate issues. Participants said scandals in the United States demonstrate the importance
of "sharing-up the leadership hierarchy to ensure that there is awareness of critical issues"
(Participant A, personal communication, March 2020).

Athletics has this way of operating in a big silo. There's an impression that
athletics tries to take care of everything inside athletics… The scrutiny around
safe-sport and coach-athlete interactions, there was a desire to keep it within the
boundaries of athletics infrastructure. But those walls are coming down.
(Participant A, personal communication, March 2020)

The data suggests that participants recognize the need for more transparency that can be
achieved by inviting perspectives from outside athletics to support issues management.

Figure 7 summarizes the warnings signs identified in the study. The data
shows that despite using surveys, anonymous reviews, and opportunities for direct
reporting to detect warnings signs amongst athletes, participants struggle to understand
this group. Participants said traditional media and social media alert them to new
problems as do look-alike issues at other schools. Issues associated with specific sports,
athletics' insular culture, and vulnerabilities related to coach-behavior were red flags
that were always raised.

Figure 7

Platforms and activities used to identify warning signs

Response

        Once warning signs were detected, it was important to understand how athletic leaders respond and the scope of action they take. Some said that issues were rarely exclusive to athletics and that issue-response was conducted at a campus level. Specifically, issues regarding equity, diversity, mental health, and bullying were present in athletics but not unique to athletics. Response was coordinated with campus level resources and addressed with campaigns that were supported through athletics. In this way, athletics' role in issue-response is to provide continuity with the institution's strategy but athletics is not responsible to develop response strategies themselves.

        The participants demonstrated recognition that effective response involves sharing problems across the institution and with support from those who are not culturally entrenched in sports. When a problem required action, all survey participants (n=5) reported they were comfortable raising issues to those in higher authority. Further, Participant A said response

involves reflecting on how athletics interfaces with other parts of the school. She emphasized the need to "invite people from outside the sports sector to help navigate" issues (personal communication, March 2020).

Evaluation and Response to Issues Specific to Athletics

To better understand how athletic leaders respond to issues and perceive risk, survey respondents were asked to evaluate the impact and likelihood of issues in varsity athletics that could affect the reputation of the school. Participants were given a list of scenarios and assigned a value between 1 and 5, with 1 being rare and insignificant, and 5 being almost certain to occur with a catastrophic impact on the school. The results were transcribed into a heat map to visualize the perception of overall potential severity of the issues on the reputation of the school (Figure 8).

As noted in Figure 8, all issues were considered low to moderate risks. Of all the issues evaluated, concussion injuries and fan-misconduct were perceived to be the most likely to occur and off-field misconduct by coaches or athletes, transportation safety issues, and infrastructure failure were categorized as having the most serious impact. Generally, respondents indicated confidence they will not face these reputational issues and are therefore may not be preparing for them.

Figure 8

Heat map: Likelihood vs. Impact of reputational issues in varsity athletics

A: Financial Mismanagement   C: Off field misconduct   E: Infrastructure Failure   G: Concussion   I On field Misconduct
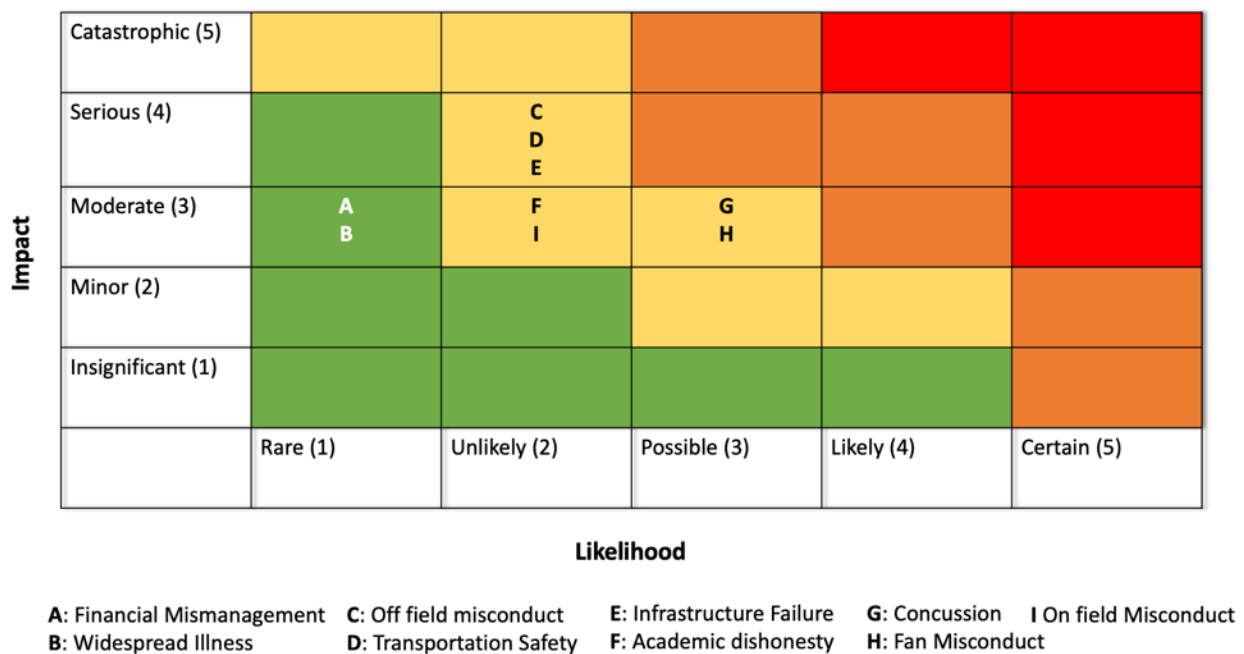B: Widespread Illness   D: Transportation Safety   F: Academic dishonesty   H: Fan Misconduct

Figure 9 outlines the most significant reputational risks identified by interview participants. Athlete maltreatment was the most frequently cited concern, which is denoted by an asterix in Figure 9. Risks related to mental health, social media, hazing or bullying, gender equity, sexual violence and physical health were also frequently cited. Aside from athlete maltreatment and physical health, the issues identified were universal to all students on campus and suggests the scope of issues that require attention is broad.

Figure 9

Top Reputational Risks Identified by Interview Participants

Risk	
Athlete maltreatment*	Physical Health
Mental health	Sexual Violence
Hazing or bullying	Gender Equity

Concussion Injury

To better understand risk related to physical health, participants were asked to reflect on the position of contact sports in relation to concussion injuries.

While half of participants (n=4) said concussion injuries were a reputation risk, others said athlete's health is a low-risk issue when compared to the health of the greater student population. Participants reported that there are several safeguards embedded in varsity sports that protect athletes and that the responsibility for their health exists with many stakeholders including coaches, officials, therapists, and administrative staff. In this context, athlete health is well supervised and was therefore considered low risk.

Despite the split opinion regarding the severity of risk, all participants acknowledged an increase in public awareness about concussions. Although awareness was high, perspectives varied as to the impact on programs. Some described an environment in which certain sports are now at risk, whereas others believed that participation numbers are not declining and therefore sports offerings at the school will remain unchanged. The data suggests a lack of consensus on the nature of concussion risk and may demonstrate why limited steps have been taken to address it.

Some criticized the media for focusing on sports like football and hockey in creating a misperception that these sports are inherently more dangerous. One participant said that, "there's been years where sports like cheerleading and lacrosse have more concussions than hockey and football, combined" (Participant B, personal communication, February 2020). Many believed there was a lack of understanding that concussion injury can happen in any sport and not just contact sports.

During these discussions, many participants reflected on positive personal experiences and described a genuine affinity for these contact sports. This personal affinity could impede athletic leaders' ability to critically examine risk. This personal context, either as an athlete, a coach, or parent-of-an-athlete, may introduce a degree of bias in their assessment and response strategies.

Rowan's Law

Rowan's Law was a catalyst for change at most schools and involved increasing education about concussions, messaging to students about risks, and improving treatment after injury. Several participants said that their policies were in place ahead of Rowan's Law which was indicative of their ability to proactively respond to risk.

Despite these changes, few participants observed a change in stakeholder behaviour.

> I'm not seeing the outside perspective changing very much at all…Rowan's Law
> is not having an impact. I sit in our football or hockey stadiums and all the parents
> and everybody cheers for the big hits. It's still a celebration of toughness.
> (Participant C, personal communication, March 2020)

Some participants acknowledged that there was a gap between risk awareness and the infrastructure and rule-changes needed to increase safety, though no one indicated how or if this gap was being addressed.

Risk spreads from club to varsity level

Many believed physical health risks are greater in minor sports, club sports, and in high school sports where the teams are conducted by volunteer coaches. Participant G said, "There are people who are volunteering and working in sport, or watching sport that are from that era and they haven't changed their mindset and haven't acknowledged the science and research" (personal communication, February 2020). There was broad agreement that sports at

this level were not well supported to reduce risk of concussions. Further, there was a belief risk

incurred at the minor level can be transferred to HEIs.

> When we're recruiting, we only know what the athlete discloses to us. But, they may have had multiple concussions before coming to us, and then they sustain another one playing for us and they're up to four. It's challenging because they don't receive the same standard of care as they would at the university with trained staff on site who understand the science and the protocols and that's what they do every day. But it's not the same at the minor sport and high school level – and that's where the concern lies. It's very difficult. (Participant B, personal communication, February 2020)

Sports Culture & Tradition

Some acknowledged the need to instill a culture shift in order to protect athletes. This

shift was deemed to be difficult as toughness and surmounting risk was celebrated and

entrenched in sport-culture. Participant G said, "It needs to happen at the highest levels so it is in

the media and it's what people see. And it's not something that's going to change in a year or

three years, it might take entire generation. So that everybody coming into sports understands the

risk" (personal communication, February 2020).

There was acknowledgement that, culturally, athletics struggles with the tension

between tradition and evidence and that, "education and the sciences are making us question

things we've always done and why we continue to do these longstanding practices simply

because we've always done them" (Participant A, personal communication, March 2020).

Participants identified the challenge of culture and tradition but demonstrated limited action to

address it.

Despite limited changes, several participants reported witnessing a shift in student-

athlete behaviour in connection to perceptions of concussion risk. Participant A stated, "we're

seeing more athletes decide for themselves whether they can continue or not, because they fear

for their future cognitive abilities" (personal communication, March 2020). Participants said

media stories about professional athletes with brain-injuries have had an impact on student-athlete behavior.

RQ3: How and to what extent do leaders define, assess, and measure risk?

This question sought to understand the frameworks leaders use to assess and make changes when faced with reputation risk. Participants were asked to reflect on the considerations involved in evaluating health risks for student-athletes in contact intercollegiate sports; what, if any, recent changes have been made in response to this issue; how they forecast stakeholder sentiments towards their program, and what influence this type of risk may pose in the future.

Changes in Response to Concussion Risk

All interview participants (n=9) and survey respondents (n=5) believed their schools had sufficiently addressed issues related to concussions in intercollegiate sports. To understand this position, participants were asked to reflect on recent changes to concussion policies and what factors led to these changes. Accordingly, media narrative and Rowan's Law increased the speed of policy changes.

One participant said, "With the heightened awareness in the media and everything like that, I think it was becoming more serious. Just, the legislation helped push it quicker" (Participant I, personal communications, February 2020). Rowan's Law resulted in: expansion of education for athletes and coaches; increased communication and about risk; increased collaboration with medical experts; and revised return-to-play protocols. This data suggests that although participants perceive government and media to have limited influence on decision-making (as noted in Table 3), these stakeholders heavily influenced changes.

Participants also said they have responded by collecting data about injuries and those in close proximity to research programs reported increased involvement in academic studies.

Others said athletes have greater access to wellness services and support for academic

accommodation when recuperating from concussion. Most reported that coaches had been

removed from return-to-play decisions and one reported the development of a concussion-

specific legal release form.

Figure 10 summarizes participants' recent responses to concussion risks. Although

participants have increased education, research, and support for injured students, few changes

lessen the actual risk for those actively engaged in contact sports. No participants reported

reduction in concussion incidents. Instead, participants said that concussion reporting is much

higher. Therefore, these changes have effectively enabled stakeholders in contact sports to

identify concussions and better treat them after the fact, but they have not prevented athletes

from suffering concussions. Ultimately, the response strategy has been to manage the risk but not

to prevent it.

Figure 10

Summary of changes implemented in the past five years related to concussion management

Recent changes related to concussions	
Formal concussion education for athletes	Organized forums to share data (OCAA)
Increased transparency regarding concussion risk	Education for coaches
Collaboration with medical experts	Changes to academic accommodation
Revisions to return-to-play protocol	Informed concussion consent form (legal)
Tracking concussion injuries	More engagement with student services
Coaches removed from return-to-play decisions	Extending concussion policies to intramural and recreation programs

Stakeholders' Response to Changes

To understand the success of the response to concussion risk, the study sought to understand stakeholders' reception to changes. It was reported that, although, historically, some coaches resisted relinquishing authority of return-to-play decisions, generally, all stakeholders were receptive to changes. Many reported that leaders in sport are comfortable delegating decision-making responsibility to those with scientific expertise. Others said stakeholders felt empowered by the additional education and that it increases confidence and ability to identify problems and respond appropriately.

In terms of challenges, participants highlighted the continued hesitancy of student-athletes to report concussion and some identified tension from coaches who were "out-ranked" by medical staff. Therefore, with rare exceptions, stakeholders did not resist changes to policies. Although these changes were made *around* the sports and not *to* the sports themselves, and generally did not impact anyone except coaches and athletes, this positive reception may empower leaders to tackle more aggressive changes that impact broader stakeholder groups.

Anticipating Response to a Worst-Case Scenario

To understand participants perceptions of stakeholders' opinions, interviewees were asked how the public would react if a student-athlete suffered a significant concussion-related injury while participating in contact sports at their school. Participants' views varied from expecting criticism and debate, anticipating legal action, to expecting little reaction at all. Many believed the public response would be negative only if the institution acted in a way that put the athlete at risk beyond what is inherent in sport. If an athlete experienced a severe concussion-related injury,

> It would lead to a discussion about where universities fit in those sports … and the
> key function of the university versus that sport. And it goes back to the concerns

around commercialization of sports and those pressure points, and where it fits within student leadership development and personal development. (Participant A, personal communication, March 2020)

Conversely, another participant said, "It's ridiculous to assume that it is the institution's responsibility to protect every last student-athlete. Should we wrap them in bubble wrap? Unfortunately, it's part of sport" (Participant E, personal communication, February 2020). Participants from the two largest institutions represented in the study conveyed the greatest concern about the reputational impacts of the scenario. Other participants responded by defending the value of sports for HEIs and the inherent risk involved anytime athletes participate.

Some suggested the sport would be blamed but not the institution and no participants believed that a catastrophic injury would result in the permanent removal of a sport. Others said that the school would receive negative feedback if the student had been injured and returned to play without following prescribed concussion protocol. No participants acknowledged a situation whereby a student-athlete would not return to athletics or academics.

Despite the unanimous confidence in the HEIs ability to address concussion risks, interview participants also said that while removing risk from sport is not possible, there are opportunities for improvement. There was acknowledgement that future changes would be dictated by the advice of health and science experts and that increased collaboration with sports-medicine and science partners was needed. One participant said, "There's an appetite to do more and that's driven by the advice of experts, the doctors and scientists, but there's not agreement on that right now… our medical people really have to guide us." (Participant A, personal communication, March 2020).

The data from RQ3 provides a definition of risk: when the institution acts in a way that put the athlete at risk beyond what is inherent in sport.

This definition informed how participants anticipated stakeholder reaction to a hypothetical scenario as, generally, they believed catastrophic injury would have minimal reputational impact on the HEI because injuries are an inherent risk in sport. The results also raise questions about how much information is needed to act. Participants reported that they use scientific data as a frame to assess risk and define the threshold of safety for students. As Participant A said future changes will be driven by "doctors and scientists", this suggests participants may feel that the responsibility for student wellness lies with the scientific community, and not with athletic leadership.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest HEIs may be vulnerable to changing societal perceptions about risk in contact intercollegiate sports due to limited environmental scanning and limited engagement with stakeholders outside of HEIs and athletics. Although participants are responsive to problems, they rely on stakeholders to actively show their dissatisfaction and take limited steps to collect information in attempt to anticipate change. The study also established that coaches and athletes are key assets in athletics but their actions create the greatest vulnerabilities for HEIs.

The data established a definition of risk: when the institution acts in a way that puts the athlete at risk beyond what is inherent in sport. This definition informs the way participants prepare for and respond to risk and limits HEIs' responsibility for student health because injuries are an inherent element in sports.

The literature review presented theories regarding reputation and reputation management in the context of higher education. It extended these theories into the establishment of identity, organization-stakeholder relationships, assessment of risk, and threat mitigation in the context intercollegiate athletics and applied them to the experience of balancing benefits and risks associated with concussion-related injuries.

Athletics Alignment to Academic Mission

The data confirmed that athletics contributes to HEI identity but found that alignment with academic mission varied.

Consistent with data presented by Steiner et. al (2013) the HEIs in this study used mission and values statements to inform stakeholder perceptions, communicate their values, and reflect strategic activities. As Christen and Gornitzka (2017) suggest, the schools represented use these statements to convey accountability as moral institutions that act to advance goals that align with societal standards. This phenomenon was evident in the way schools uniformly described how integrity and accountability inform how innovation is achieved: through critical thinking, challenging the known world, and being receptive to changes. This aligns with Sisco (2012) who posited that stakeholders expect publicly-funded organizations to be ethical and honest as defined by the norms of its community.

When examining these statements as a lens to understand the alignment between activities in high contact intercollegiate sports and the HEI mission, themes of distinction, collaboration and excellence, strongly aligned. However, the strength of tradition that reportedly informs intercollegiate athletics was contrary to themes of critical thinking, openness to change, and focus on scholarship.

Evidence also suggested perceptions of some stakeholders align with Bowen and Levin (2003) and Mitten and Ross (2014) in that intercollegiate sports impedes the teaching and research mission of the HEI. Participants rationalized that despite some disconnect between academic contributions and athletic activities, the value in athletics lies in leadership opportunity for athletes and community-building and stakeholder support for the institution. This aligns with Wæraas (2008) who suggests that public organizations are obligated to embrace broad and sometimes conflicting values in order to best serve the public interest.

As suggested by Fombrun and Van Riel (2004), analysis of reputation management activities found that HEIs use intercollegiate athletics to help stakeholders understand and identify with the organization. Intercollegiate sports are used to build knowable and positive narratives about student experience to augment supportive behavior towards the school. Like Toma and Cross (1998) reported, results indicate this supportive behavior translates into increased recruitment and results in financial benefits for the HEI. Data also indicated intercollegiate sports informs alumni relations, or, as Participant H stated "long-time supporter" relationships. Consistent with Alessandri (2007) and Downes (2017) some athletics programs in this study experienced greater visibility than some academic programs and were revenue-generating; all of which contribute to the broader reputation of the HEI. Collectively, the data suggests that actions and relationships in intercollegiate athletic programs in this study inform HEI identity and contribute to reputation; however, actions in varsity athletics are not uniformly consistent with the stated HEI mission.

Although fulsome commercialization of varsity athletics does not exist on the same scale as some American HEIs, data indicates that market influence and competitive pressure does result in an increased focus on revenue-generating objectives; which, in some cases; was

reported to take time away from the traditional athlete-focused activities. Over time, should these pressures continue or increase, this could result in athletics programs diverging further from the academic mission of the institution. Notably, this phenomenon was more prevalent in universities than in colleges. To prevent this development, HEIs should increase organizational proximity to and relationships between athletics and curricular programs.

Insular Decision-Making

The study found that HEI leaders may be challenged by the homogenous nature and insular problem-solving culture in athletics.

Aside from external market forces, decision-making was described to be primarily influenced by internal stakeholders or stakeholders within a sports organization. This phenomenon may promote a better connection to the institutional mission but may leave the program vulnerable to blind spots regarding perceptions and values of external stakeholders. As Fombrun, Gardberg, and Barnett (2000) note, should a gap arise between the expectations of these stakeholders and the actions of the institution, reputational crisis could result.

Participants reported on the historical trend of athletics operating in a silo with an insular focus, which was consistent with stakeholder analysis data. Also, leaders in the athletic programs were often experienced competitive athletes themselves. Although this was not an interview question, both deans and athletic directors related current leadership experiences back to their lived-experience as an athlete, coach, or parent-of-an-athlete. These personal experiences occurred, primarily, during an era when concussion prevention and management was not informed by rigorous evidence. Although participants uniformly support evidence-informed protocol regarding concussions, it could be suggested that the lived-experience of the leader shapes decisions and perceptions and further contributes to promoting historical traditions and

values in sport management, above the influence of emerging scientific evidence. Further, deans and athletic directors were sports fans with personal and emotive connections to athletics. As Heffernan (2012) suggests that "we are blind to the flaws and failings of what we love" (p.43) this may promote limited reflection about the concerns of non-supporters or non-fans. Collectively, when analyzing the lens through which management decisions are made in varsity athletics, the diversity of opinion and experience is limited and may be biased by personal experience and affinity for sport. Further, the data suggests a recognition that athletics management is a homogenous group. As participant A said, "In order to get where we need to go, we need to invite people from outside the sports sector to help us navigate these times because it's shifting very, very quickly" (personal communication, March 2020). Increasing the diversity of experience and representation in athletics management may enable programs to more critically examine stakeholder-organization relationships and better protect reputation.

As has been established, to maintain a good reputation it is important to understand stakeholder expectations and align organization activities to meet those expectations. However, what is normative can change as new information and evidence can shift perceptions (Steiner et al., 2003). Consistent with Danyluchuk and Chelladurai's (1999) findings, few participants spent their time information-seeking, and, instead, spent the majority of their time handling disturbances. Notably, participants from colleges and smaller universities seemed to spend more time reacting to problems, compared to the larger universities supported by a deeper leadership hierarchy. Programs empowered by an executive director and supported by middle and lower management roles appeared to take a more strategic and less reactive approach to information-seeking than did their counterparts. Greater operational support appeared to increase participant's ability to collect information and act strategically. Although this phenomenon is likely

influenced by available financial resources in the department, leaders should reflect on the time spent reacting to problems compared to planning and strategizing solutions. Increasing protected time to focus on information-collection, relationship-building, and strategy, may improve reputation protection outcomes.

Stakeholder behavior, perceptions of risk, and related response

The study found that HEIs may be vulnerable to reputational risk due to misperceptions of supportive stakeholder behavior in athletics.

Although formal environmental scanning programs were limited, all study participants reported an increase in public awareness regarding risk of concussion with a particular focus on football and ice hockey. Participants also reported a shift in athlete behavior in that more athletes were choosing to remove themselves from athletic competition out of fear of potential long-term impairment. The catalyst for this change was reported to be exposure to an increased media narrative and Rowan's Law. Larkin (2003) suggests that emerging media interest, political and regulatory initiatives, expanding scientific-evidence, and emergence of a protagonist (i.e. Rowan Stringer), are criteria that indicate an emerging or imminent crisis.

Despite this public awareness and change in athlete behavior, participants reported no observable changes in stakeholder behavior. Parents, alumni, sponsors, fans, and institution leaders continue to fill stadiums and arenas to support contact intercollegiate sport matches. Further, when asked to assess the likelihood and impact of severe concussion injury, as outlined by Larkin (2003), participants categorize this as a low-risk issue. As described by Heffernan (2012), and reported by Participant C, this perception of low-risk status and related inaction may be due, in part, to the evidence being contrary to the objectives or the culture of the sport and institution. This study shows that despite meeting Larkin's criteria for imminent crisis, there is

limited motivation to make changes to athletics programing. This is consistent with Dyck, Cluverius and Gerson (2019) who reported that despite scientific data, perceptions of concussion risk are polarized.

Although athletic program offerings have not changed, some institutions have acknowledged an increasing legal vulnerability. One participant institution responded to this vulnerability by developing an informed concussion consent legal release form, which is more comprehensive than an informed consent release, that athletes are required to sign before engaging in varsity athletics. Other institutions reported limiting legal vulnerability by following the protocol outlined in Rowan's Law. Notably, Rowan's Law aligns with existing policies developed by youth sport in the United States; which was largely developed out of a need for organizations to protect themselves in a highly litigious environment (Hall, 2015). Although Ontario is not considered a highly litigious environment, institutions would benefit from adopting this enhanced concussion consent form as a means of amplifying their legal protection.

Further, as per Coombs' (2018) spillover phenomenon, institutions in the sector are vulnerable to actions occurring at any other institution. As stakeholder analysis, coach oversight, legal protection, and value alignment between athletics and curricular programs are varied, many institutions that perceive themselves to be well supported, may in fact be vulnerable. Therefore, despite the competitive environment of HEIs, a cooperative approach to reputation risk management would benefit all schools.

Despite the contradiction in certain values, Larkin may suggest HEIs are responding appropriately to concussion risk, as Participant C stated, "it's one of those things where you put as much support around it as you can to make sure everyone is as safe as possible and just do your best to make it work" (personal communication, February 2020). As stakeholder behavior

continues to support high contact sports despite known risks, schools are "making it work" it that they mitigate risk by supporting athlete health services and increase communication of risk, and balance it with perceived low likelihood of catastrophic injury occurrence and stakeholder support. However, this system heavily relies on student-athlete self-reporting and coach-organization relationships.

Despite HEIs' best efforts to understand student-athletes, students are reportedly skilled at masking problems and may have unreported concussion events that occurred at the club or minor sports level prior to joining the intercollegiate athletic level. A cultural or generational mindset in pre-varsity sports, that is less attuned to known risks, becomes a problem for HEIs. Athletes, coaches, staff, and fans have been immersed in that approach to risk and bring it into HEIs. HEIs inherit athletes' prior injuries and are shaped by the perspectives and behaviour of their stakeholders. Therefore, in order to protect themselves, there is an incentive for HEIs to reduce harm in club, minor sports and high school sports.

Further, the strength of coach-organization relationships is varied, and performance and sport-specific priorities often inform coach behavior. Stronger oversight of coaching staff that includes promoting and incentivizing alignment with HEI values is needed.

In addition to athlete transparency and coach-organization relationships, the present approach to risk mitigation relies on perceived stakeholder support. Evidence indicating the degree to which this support exists is primarily anecdotal and may be inaccurate. Athletic leaders must engage in more proactive information-seeking, such as opinion polling outside of sport and HEIs, reflecting on emerging scientific literature, and formal media analysis in order to better understand the degree of support or dissidence from external stakeholders.

Forecasting Response to Crisis

Participants' definition of reputation risk in athletics informs their perceptions of a nearly impenetrable goodwill towards their HEIs.

The study shows that if participants were confronted by a catastrophic concussion injury to a student, most believe that stakeholders would blame the situation and not the institution. The data suggests that participants perceive that as long as the school does not act in a way that puts the athlete in danger beyond what is inherent in the sport, the school would not be vulnerable to crisis. However, Coombs (2018) notes that stakeholders will either blame the situation or the organization; and if the organization is perceived to be at fault, it is likely to result in reputational decline. As the data indicates athletic leaders perform limited environmental scanning and stakeholder analysis; which Coombs (2015b) suggests prevents reputational threats from evolving into crisis; it is plausible perceptions are incorrect and reputational vulnerability is more profound. In an era where digital connection enables activist or affinity groups to emerge quickly (Heffernan, 2012), HEIs are likely more vulnerable than they perceive themselves to be.

Athletic leaders may perceive the limited commercialization of varsity athletics as an ethical buffer that limits reputational vulnerability. However, varsity athletics enables institutions to increase visibility, create authentic emotional appeal; and establish a shared understanding of the organization across multiple stakeholder groups; which Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) state contribute to supportive behavior, and results in competitive financial positioning (O'Callaghan, 2007). Therefore, varsity athletics does have a financial value for HEIs.

Notably, a participant posited that the institution would be more likely to consider reassessing the status of a high-risk sport if that sport's team consistently performed poorly. Poor performance would result in a decline in support from stakeholders and create an environment

that is more receptive to changes. This position is consistent with findings from Sinanovic and Pestek (2016) in that decision-making is influenced by stakeholder interest and strength of relationships. As Cranmer and Sanderson (2018) warned that sports organizations will face resistance when implementing new policies, this phenomenon could inform the planning or timing of actioning successful program changes.

Reputation Vulnerabilities: Coaches and Recruitment

The study established that coaches are a crucial variable in the connection between athletic and academic values; however, inconsistencies in how coaches are managed contribute to reputational vulnerabilities and can broaden the athletics-academic value gap.

The present response strategy to concussion risk is to increase education, communication, transparency, and access to health services in order to protect athletes. However, HEIs remain vulnerable as participants consistently reported that students do not disclose problems or actively mask problems to avoid being removed from sport. Further, the lack of organized approach to concussion management in minor sports and high school sports transfers and increases risk at the HEI level. HEIs recruit athletes who have undocumented and untreated concussion experiences which place them at greater risk of injury when participating at the varsity level; which current risks strategies do not account for.

This phenomenon connects to the need for coaches to be more fulsomely immersed in the mission and objectives of the HEI and shift priorities away from being exclusively sport-specific and performance-driven. As HEIs begin to incur risk at the athlete recruitment stage, it is essential that coaches and recruitment staff apply this consideration from the outset. As reported by Participant B; for example, hockey players are recruited from the OHL and may have a

history of undocumented and unsupported concussions when commencing play for the

university. This demonstrates a willfulness to promote performance above wellness.

The value and risk related to coaching staff was a theme that emerged in the study. As

noted by Participant H, coaches are equal parts asset and liability. The study showed that coaches

hugely influence the degree to which student-athletes' lived-experiences align with personal

goals, and are a pivotal element to the organizational connection between athletic and academic

values. The study also shows that coaches are only distantly connected to the mission of the

school. Therefore, coaches can promote or limit gaps in athletic and academic values. However,

the degree to which coaches are immersed in broader HEI values is inconsistent across schools.

Athletics programs should develop consistent onboarding and maintenance programs for

coaching staff that promote connection to the HEI mission and alignment with academic values.

Anticipating Change

Perceptions of stakeholder support, personal affinity for sports, sports culture, and

practices engrained at the minor sport level may impact HEI leaders' capacity to respond to risk.

This phenomenon informs the glacial pace at which program offerings are anticipated to change.

Overwhelmingly, study participants said a decline in participation was the critical metric

that informed whether or not a sport should be offered in HEIs. As risk of injury is inherent in

sport, reflection about student wellness was minimal. Although athletes are increasingly

removing themselves from sports due to fear of life-long impairment, generally, participation

trends have not declined. Data suggested that if the narrative about concussions is left "as-is", it

may take a generation for risk perceptions and related behavior to influence sport culture in a

way that promotes changes to sport offerings in Ontario HEIs. This shift requires every athlete,

parent, coach, manager, fan, sponsor, and alumnus to be "raised" in sport culture that reflects concern for concussion risk.

To accelerate change, the data suggested participants want more, clear, scientific information to inform policy changes that conflict with sport culture and that may be unpopular with stakeholders. This is despite the ever-growing body of scientific data demonstrating long-term health risks, coupled with reports that participants are comfortable raising issues of concern to those in higher authority. Therefore, the question for athletic leaders is: how much data will be enough? There may exist a need for concussion researchers and health advocacy bodies like the Canadian Pediatric Society to adopt less cautious and more explicit language when communicating the risk of concussions before athletic leaders feel sufficiently empowered to advocate unpopular change. Most participants did not feel responsible for interpreting societal temperament towards athletics because their definition of risk, exposing athletes to risk beyond was in inherent in sport, insulates them from vulnerabilities created by individual sports.

As participants spend the majority of their time "handling disturbances" primarily related to athlete behavior and the least amount of time "information-seeking" as is consistent with Danylchuk and Chelladurai (1999); they rely on sports organizations and governing bodies to distill data and translate findings into recommendations. Therefore, there is an increased responsibility on these bodies to engage in emerging research while being sensitive to, but not biased by, sport culture and personal experience. Further, these organizations have an opportunity to advise schools on how best to manage known risks, such as following Larkin's (2003) suggestions to plan for high-risk scenarios; conduct audits; and actively gather data that can inform planning.

Many participants said the absence of media scrutiny was an indicator of how well they respond to problems. This data suggests that athletic leaders believe they have failed in their responsiveness only when stakeholder dissatisfaction results in negative media coverage. As this is often the most detrimental outcome of stakeholder dissatisfaction, it calls into question how participants define success. Although organizations may be disinclined from inviting media scrutiny, for an institution with a history of insular problem-solving and recognition that increased transparency can improve outcomes, perhaps a more open approach to media engagement would be beneficial.

Furthermore, the athletic leaders in this study operate programs that are positioned within institutions whose founding principles are to contribute to and take action informed by evidence; are attuned to societal needs; are ethical entities; are receptive to change; and are world leaders. On paper, they are well positioned to implement program changes that support student wellness. However, as Shulman and Bowen (2018) noted, university leaders fear negative stakeholder reactions and this may impede change. As stakeholder analysis, beyond student-athlete assessments, and environmental scanning are limited, programs should engage in these activities to be better informed of emerging issues and increase understanding of stakeholder support or dissidence.

This study established that athletic leaders face many challenges when considering how best to respond to the growing risk of concussions. Perceptions of unwavering stakeholder support for contact sports, personal affinity for sports, a culture of tradition and toughness, and practices engrained at a pre-varsity level all impact leaders' ability to effectively respond to risk. Athletes may lead the change by removing themselves from sports out of fear of life long impairment. As decline in participation is a key metric participants use to identify problems that

warrant a response, this may ultimately be the catalyst that inspires program changes. Essentially, athletes are choosing to protect themselves as institutional policies lag behind known risks.

The Role of Research-Intensive Universities

The study established that research-intensive universities may have a greater responsibility to lead changes in risk management in contact-intercollegiate sports. Research-intensive universities are building data about risks associated with concussions while they actively promote and benefit from activities that contribute to those same negative health outcomes in their students. This may contribute to increased reputational vulnerability as the institution's stated values and actions are in conflict with each other. This contradiction of activity may also threaten their position as "being accountable as moral institutions" (Christen and Gornitzka, 2017, p.39). These universities are building the scientific narrative leaders need to support change. As experts, they are positioned to advocate for that change and should do so to maintain their ethical position in society and protect the integrity of the pursuit of scholarship. These institutions have an opportunity to lead change and not only protect their reputations from these vulnerabilities but develop stronger reputations in the process.

At the time of writing this report, athletics is suspended due to Covid-19. Therefore, the burden of handling disturbances is significantly lighter creating time for more research, analysis, reflection, and planning.

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Conclusion

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The focus of this study was to establish how HEI leaders in Ontario balance the reputational benefits and risks of contact intercollegiate athletics. Through interviews with athletic directors and deans responsible for student wellness; a survey to members of the Ontario

College Athletic Association; and content analysis of mission, vision, and value statements, this study investigated athletics' alignment with academic mission, how leaders respond to changes in stakeholder and societal values; and how leaders define, assess and respond to risk.

Firstly, the study established that academic values and athletic values are not explicitly aligned. The degree of alignment varied between institutions and was impacted by organizational proximity to, and relationships with, curricular programs and services as well as through coaching staff's ability to internalize institutional mission.

The study also confirmed that athletics supports critical relationships and activities that inform HEI identity and contributes to reputation.

To understand participants' perceptions and responsiveness to changing stakeholder and societal values, the study examined this phenomenon in the context of concussion injuries in contact intercollegiate sports. Accordingly, the study found participants perceived a change in public awareness of risk to athletes but that this risk had not resulted in a shift in stakeholder behavior and, therefore, did not warrant adopting changes that would impact stakeholders' experience of intercollegiate sports. This assessment was informed, primarily, by stakeholders positioned within sport, internal to the HEI, or from "long-standing supporters" of athletics programing. Further, the likelihood and degree of risk of catastrophic injury to student-athletes was perceived to be low due to the resources in place to support athlete health. As sports was reported to have a culture unique to itself, and unlike curricular programs in HEIs, notably a culture informed by tradition and supported by the lived-experiences of those who manage athletics, it was forecasted that it would take a generation before stakeholder behavior changes to align with perceived risks to students.

Regarding the definition and measurement of risk, participants perceived reputational risk would arise if the institution acts in a way that places the student in danger beyond what is inherent in sport. Risk assessment and measurement were somewhat limited, informed by internal reporting, communicated through legislation, and through data distilled by athletic organizations. Increasing the diversity of experience represented in athletics management may improve risk assessment strategies and encourage risk-response to be more reflective of perceptions held outside of sports, and encourage proactive policy changes that may not be fully aligned with current sports culture, but that may influence that culture to be more reflective of evidence-informed risk.

The position of coaches, as a critical element in academic and athletic alignment and a factor in risk exposure and risk management, emerged as a theme in the study. As increasing values alignment and reducing risk is a desirable outcome for HEIs, schools should adopt a strategic approach to coach-oversight that more fulsomely immerses coaching staff into organizational values and amplifies criteria for coach assessment. When reflecting on the definition of risk, specifically, exposing students to danger beyond what is inherent in sport, coaches' behavior may be the issue with the highest risk and highest likelihood of occurrence in intercollegiate athletics today.

The study found an incongruency in the connection between student-athletes' ability to mask problems and participants' reliance on student-reporting structures to identify problems. This may require athletics leaders to create more time for critical and strategic thinking in attempt to identify problems before they become issues that need to be managed.

As the mission of HEIs is to adopt critical thinking informed by scholarship to promote innovation for the betterment of society, there is an opportunity for schools to live this mission

and take a leadership role in expanding risk assessment and response strategies in athletics within their institutions and become a model for minor sports organizations.

Ultimately, the study found that reputational benefits of contact intercollegiate sports relate to influencing supportive stakeholder behavior that translates into competitive advantages for the institution. Although there is acknowledgement that reputation risk is present, in the event of serious concussion-related injury to a student, this is considered low impact and low probability. Institutions adopt a risk-management approach, not a risk elimination approach, which enables them to maintain stakeholder support while buffering risk by providing access to health services and increased communication and education of personal injury risk. Despite this approach, HEIs remain vulnerable as promoting activities that amplify competitive advantage and that discount scholarship that suggests exposure to risk is higher than stakeholder behavior suggests, coupled with an environment where activist groups assemble quickly, may result in an underestimation of reputational risk.

The study found participants would more readily make changes if health research findings were definitive and explicit in categorizing certain sports as high-risk. Athletic leaders must continue to question whether or not their programs deliver the values and standards promoted in their mission statements, and evaluate the threshold of evidence required to support changes. Going forward, if there is a gap between values and programming, HEIs should take steps to realign activities in order to more effectively protect their reputations.

Recommendations

Athletic leaders can use the following questions to assess their program with the goal of improving value alignment.

Self-assessment Questions:

Environmental Scanning

1. How do we consider and include perspectives held outside of sports?

2. What social listening tools are we using?

3. Do stakeholders have to show their dissatisfaction in order to gain our attention?

Diversity and Transparency in Decision-Making

4. What is the diversity of experience (gender, ethnicity, professional background, athletics) represented in our program?

5. Describe the flow of information when problem-solving. When and how are touch-points outside of athletics involved?

Governance, Training & Assessment

6. How are academic values emphasized or incentivized with our coaches and athletes?

7. How are our values communicated at the athlete and coach recruitment stage?

8. How are our coaches managed? How are our coaches on-boarded and continually assessed?

9. Do we have a code of conduct for coaches that supports our values and reflects known risks?

10. How much of our staff time is spent on commercial interests?

Legal Protection

11. Have we adopted a concussion consent form?

Responsibility Outside of my HEI

12. How are we using our position to influence behavior at the minor sport level?

Novel Research Opportunities

To extend the utility of this research, it would be useful to apply Larkin's traffic light escalation model to reputational issues in athletics. Future research would benefit from extending the survey population to Ontario University Athletics (OUA), or broadening all data collection to a national scope in partnership with the Canadian College Athletic Association (CCAA) and U Sports. Exploring themes that compare risk assessment strategies adopted by female versus male leaders, and in large versus small institutions would be beneficial.

Further research could investigate the development of a framework for external stakeholder analysis, including opinion polling, which would provide more accurate assessment of stakeholder positioning on risk; as well as annual literature reviews of concussion scholarship and related stakeholder communication. There is an opportunity to examine whether or not an increased operational connection with the communication function increases depth of issue analysis and related stakeholder assessments. Also, replicating a sentiment analysis study, like that performed by Bell and Sanderson (2016), in a Canadian context could increase HEIs understanding of societal positioning towards contact sports.

Limitations

The conclusions developed from this research are limited due to the small sample size of the interview participants. Findings are also limited due to the survey response rate that reflects 18.5% of the total population of college athletic directors in Ontario. Although the survey population is limited, 18.5% is still statistically significant. However, due to this sample size and response rate, only analytical generalizations can be achieved in this study. Further, as the researcher is an employee within the industry this study examines, a degree of personal and contextual bias may exist. Further, the content analysis was limited due to the choice to analyze

the mission, vision, and value statements of only those institutions that were represented in the study and therefore may not reflect all HEIs in Ontario. However, the utility of this research is in its contribution to a growing dialogue about the impact and position of athletics in higher education. In this way, the research raises new questions and identifies new potential areas of research.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Where 1 is no impact, and 5 is significant impact, rate the degree of impact that intercollegiate athletics have on the following areas at your school:
- Student recruitment 1-5
- Alumni relations 1-5
- Student life 1-5
- Academic reputation 1-5
- Government relations 1-5

2. Please provide 3 adjectives that describe the academic program at your school.

3. Please provide 3 adjectives that describe the athletics program at your school.

4. Where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree, describe your opinion of the following statements:

- The intercollegiate athletics program impacts public perceptions about my school as a whole. 1-5
- Academic values and athletics values are completely aligned in my school. 1-5
- Winning is a priority of the intercollegiate athletics program at my school. 1-5

5. Where 1 is least influential, and 5 is most influential, rate the following stakeholders based on their degree of influence on the decision-making in your intercollegiate athletics program.

- Student-athletes 1-5
- Parents of athletes 1-5
- College/university leadership 1-5
- Faculty 1-5
- Government 1-5
- Media 1-5
- Sponsors / business partners 1-5
- Alumni 1-5
- Athletic associations/governing bodies 1-5
- Other colleges/universities 1-5
- Other (please state) 1-5

6. Where 1 is very uncomfortable and 5 is completely comfortable, what is your degree of comfort or discomfort when raising issues of concern to those in higher authority at your school. 1-5

7. Where 1 is very unlikely, and 5 is very likely, assess the likelihood of the following situations occurring at your school:

- Serious concussion-related injury of an athlete

- Off-field misconduct of athlete/coaches
- On-field misconduct of athlete/coaches
- Misconduct of fans
- Financial mismanagement
- Transportation safety issues
- Wide-spread illness
- Academic dishonesty of an athlete
- Significant infrastructure failure

8. Where 1 is little impact on your school, and 5 is significant impact on your school, assess the following situations for the degree of impact on your school:

- Serious concussion-related injury of an athlete
- Off-field misconduct of athletes or coaches
- On-field misconduct of athletes or coaches
- Misconduct of fans
- Financial mismanagement
- Transportation safety issues
- Wide-spread illness
- Academic dishonesty of an athlete
- Significant infrastructure failure

9. How do you stay current with emerging issues and trends (political, social, health-related) regarding intercollegiate athletics? Select all that apply.

- Listening to athletes/coaches/parents
- Listening to other colleagues
- Listening to doctors
- Listening to politicians
- Following the news
- Following social media
- Reading scientific literature
- Conducting opinion polls or surveys
- Reading information from athletic associations or governing bodies
- Other – explain

10. How would you know if stakeholders were dissatisfied with your program's operations or policies?

- Athletes/coaches/parents would tell me
- Discussions with university or college leadership
- Student activism
- Opinion polling
- Legal action

- Scientific evidence
- Look-alike issues at other schools
- Decline in participation
- Media coverage
- Other

11. Where 1 is very poorly and 5 is very well, how do you think your organization has addressed issues related to concussions in intercollegiate sports? 1- 5.

Appendix B: Interview Preamble & Questions

Hello. My name is Cheryl Crocker and I am a Masters student in the Communications Management program at McMaster University. I'm calling because I would like to interview you for a research study about how college and university leaders in Ontario balance the reputational benefits and risks associated with student participation in contact intercollegiate-sports. Your answers may guide colleges and universities to better understand stakeholder and societal expectations and help schools enhance their reputation management strategies.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to end the interview at any time. All your information will be kept confidential and will only be shared with my research supervisor. If I use a quote from our interview, I will insure that your anonymity is maintained. Although the probability is very low, there is a small chance that your identity could be revealed. If you were identified and the opinions you share are controversial, this may impact your credibility within your peer group.

With your permission, I would also like to record the interview as it will allow me to listen more attentively to our discussion. Following our interview, I will transcribe our discussion. Once my research study is completed, both the audio files and transcripts will be erased.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

1. How do you feel the academic mission of your school and athletic values align?

2. There is a perception that the strategic decision-making in the post-secondary environment has become increasingly market-driven. Is this your experience and if so, how has it impacted your intercollegiate athletics program?

3. Which stakeholders are the most outspoken or influential with regards to policy-making in the intercollegiate athletics program at your school? Please describe their priorities.

4. When considering the reputation of your athletics program, what kind of warning signs do you look for that may indicate there is a potential problem on the horizon?

5. In your opinion, what is the public perception regarding risks of concussion-related injuries in intercollegiate sports? What factors inform that opinion?

6. In your opinion, what are the most significant reputational issues in intercollegiate athletics in Ontario, today?

7. How would you know if stakeholders were dissatisfied with your program's operations or policies?

8. Tell me about any recent changes to your school's concussion policies or protocol. What led to these changes?

9. How did your stakeholders react to these changes?

10. If one of your athletes suffered a significant concussion related-injury, how do you feel the public would view the school's role in this?

11. Do you think your school has sufficiently addressed issues related to concussions in intercollegiate sports?