

Playing Multiple Positions: Student-Athlete Identity Salience and Conflict

Landy Di Lu, Kathryn L. Heinze, and Sara Soderstrom
University of Michigan

Student-athletes enact dual roles, as students and athletes, and hold corresponding identities. The salience of these identities and conflict between them have implications for student-athlete wellness. The purpose of this study was to (a) gain insight into organizational and individual characteristics associated with identity salience, by examining student-athletes across universities; and (b) shed light on situations of identity salience and conflict for student-athletes. We conducted a survey study of student-athletes across 17 universities that captured both quantitative and qualitative data. Our results reveal a relationship between identity salience and individual performance (academic and athletic) and university ranking. Further, we found an interaction between athlete and student identity salience, such that identifying strongly as a student, athlete, both, or neither has implications for conflict. Finally, by unpacking situations of identity salience and conflict, we show similarities and differences across student-athletes' experiences. This study has implications for universities and athletic departments.

Keywords: identity conflict, identity salience, student-athletes, survey methods

College student-athletes face significant time and energy demands (Adler & Adler, 1987; Gaston-Gayles, 2004), and experience corresponding levels of stress (Krieg, 2013). There are more than 460,000 student-athletes competing in 24 sports every year in the United States, as part of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Student-athletes' dual roles and responsibilities, as students and athletes, have implications for their identities, or the meanings they attribute to themselves (Goffman, 1963). A student-athlete's "student" identity may be more or less salient than his or her "athlete" identity (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Further, student-athletes can experience conflict between their identities as students and athletes (Adler & Adler, 1987; Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Settles, Sellers, & Damas, 2002). Identity salience and conflict, in turn, have consequences for student-athletes' mental health and wellness (Miller & Hoffman, 2009).

There is a growing body of research on student-athlete identity. In their seminal qualitative work with a men's college basketball program, Adler and Adler

Lu and Heinze are with the Sport Management Program, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Soderstrom is with the Organizational Studies Program and Program in the Environment, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Address author correspondence to Kathryn Heinze at wheelerk@umich.edu.

(1987) found that student-athletes' academic identities became less salient, or important, over time, as athletes experienced demanding roles, peer subcultures, and a lack of reinforcement around academic accomplishments. More recent research in this area looks at relationships between student-athlete identity and career issues, including career planning (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000; Lally & Kerr, 2005), career maturity (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996), and career development (Brown & Hartley, 1998). Further, other work identifies connections between student-athlete identity and psychological factors, such as adjustment and satisfaction (Killeya-Jones, 2005).

Although knowledge of student-athlete identity is building, there is a need to better unpack identity salience and conflict. In particular, studies of student-athlete identity neglect to consider both athlete and student identity salience and their interaction in the relationship to identity conflict. Further, this work usually focuses on a single university or college (e.g., Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Settles et al., 2002), ignoring the potential impact of organizational context on identity salience. Finally, we lack an understanding of situations of identity salience and conflict among student-athletes. Student-athletes likely feel like students when in class and athletes when competing, but we know little about other contexts in which these identities are prominent and there is conflict between them.

Addressing these important gaps in the literature, we center on the following questions: What individual and organizational characteristics are associated with student and athlete identity salience? What is the relationship between student-athlete identity salience and identity conflict? What are situations of identity salience and identity conflict? To examine these questions, we administered a survey to 703 student-athletes across 17 Division I universities that captures both quantitative and qualitative data, and we collected archival organizational data.

This study contributes to the literature on student-athlete identity in several ways. First, we identify a relationship between individual performance (academic and athletic) and identity salience, as well as university ranking (academic and athletic) and identity salience. Second, the interaction we find between athlete and student identity salience in the relationship to identity conflict demonstrates how different combinations of identity (identifying strongly as a student, athlete, both or neither) have implications for the conflict experienced by student-athletes. Further, by unpacking situations of identity salience and conflict, we shed light on common experiences across student-athletes—such as the role of physical appearance in athlete identity salience and exclusion of opportunities for identity conflict—and differences across students, including how studying can be viewed as normalization or a distraction in situations of student identity salience. The results of this study can inform university and athletic department policies and practices related to student-athletes.

Theory and Hypotheses

The concept of identity is complex. Individuals hold multiple identities, or self-conceptions, that are formed through experiences, behavior, and social relationships (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Thoits, 1983). Some identities are more important to an individual's core feelings of identity than others. Identity salience, or the "the

likelihood of one identity surfacing in a variety of situations” (Stryker, 1968, p. 560), is shaped by the organizational environment and relative centrality of an individual’s roles (Adler & Adler, 1991; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Sturm, Feltz, & Gilson, 2011). In performing and maintaining these different roles, an individual may experience identity conflict. That is, the individual conceives of two or more identities as being “constructed so differently in terms of thoughts, feelings, and traits associated with each that they are irreconcilable” (Killeya-Jones, 2005, p. 169). Identity conflict surfaces when the demands of one or more roles make it difficult for an individual to meet the responsibilities of another role (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Frone, 2000).

Student-Athlete Identity Salience

Student-athletes have multiple identities tied to their roles as students and athletes, and they invest in these role identities simultaneously (Brown & Hartley, 1998). Findings around the salience of these different identities, and how they change over time, are mixed. Some studies suggest that student-athletes “over identify” with the athlete role (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2003), whereas other work finds that student-athletes identify strongly with being a student and moderately with being an athlete (Settles et al., 2002). These different results are partly reconciled by considering changes over time. Although Adler and Adler (1987) found that athletes’ academic identity diminished over their university careers, more recent research indicates that student-athletes’ academic roles become more important over time. In particular, several studies found that student-athletes identified strongly with their athlete role for much of their university experience, but increased their investment in the academic role during the upper years (Chen, Snyder, & Magner, 2010; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2003).

Student-athletes’ identity salience has implications for career issues and task performance. Murphy and colleagues (1996) found that strongly and exclusively identifying with the athlete role has negative consequences for career maturity. Similarly, in a qualitative study, Lally and Kerr (2005) discovered that over-identifying with the athlete role was negatively related to career planning during student-athletes’ early university careers. Notably, other scholars found no significant relationship between athlete identity and career development (Brown & Hartley, 1998; Martens & Cox, 2000). In terms of task performance, through an experimental design, Yopyk and Prentice (2005) found that when student-athletes were primed with their athlete identity, they had lower self-regard and performed less well on a challenging math test than did those primed with their student identity.

Although the literature indicates that there are important implications of the student-athlete identity, we know less about the factors affecting student-athlete identity salience. At the individual level, there is some evidence that, compared with males, females hold a stronger student identity (Harrison et al., 2009; Sturm et al., 2011). Some research shows that the year in college reflects a gradual decrease in student-athletes’ perception of athlete identity (Chen et al., 2010). Beyond sex and year in college, factors related to academic and athletic performance likely shape student-athlete identity salience through role evaluation. Adler and Adler (1987) found that college athletes who received poor or marginal grades

subsequently diminished the importance of their student role. These findings align with the social psychological literature that indicates identity salience is positively affected by the degree to which its respective role is positively evaluated with regard to one's performance (Hoelter, 1983). Together, this work suggests that student-athletes are likely to embrace identities that give them positive feedback and distance themselves from identities for which they receive negative reinforcement. Thus, we would expect that the greater a student-athlete's academic performance, the more likely the individual is to identify as a student. Similarly, if the student-athlete is a top performer on his or her team, he or she is more likely to hold a strong athlete identity, reinforced through praise and accolades. We offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: The greater the student-athlete's academic performance, the stronger his/her student identity salience.

Hypothesis 1b: The greater the student-athlete's athletic performance, the stronger his/her athlete identity salience.

There is very little research on the relationship between organizational-level factors and student-athlete identity salience, partly due to single-university design. One of the only studies at the organizational level, by Sturm and colleagues (2011), looking at two schools, found no significant relationship between the university's competition division level (i.e., Division I vs. Division III) and student-athlete identity salience. University rankings are another relevant factor that has not been examined. Academic and athletic rankings are artifacts of a university's culture that are indicative of organizational norms and values, as well as the availability of resources and supports (Schein, 1990, 2010). This cultural context can attract individuals who share the organization's values, as well as shape the salience of members' identities, through socialization and motivational processes (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Pascale, 1985). Thus, for example, universities with higher academic rankings may draw more student-athletes who greatly value academics and identify strongly as students—and/or, as student-athletes participate in high academically ranked universities, and interact with fellow students and professors, student identities become more prominent. A similar dynamic could be found for universities with higher athletic rankings, but with a different set of organizational values and resources. Given both possibilities in the relationship between organizational context and individual identity salience, we offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: The greater the university's academic ranking, the stronger the student-athlete's student identity salience.

Hypothesis 2b: The greater the university's athletic ranking, the stronger the student-athlete's athlete identity salience.

Student-Athlete Identity Conflict

As student-athletes invest in their student and athlete identities, they may experience difficulty in meeting the responsibilities of both roles. Adler and Adler (1987,

1991) found that student-athletes experienced a high degree of role conflict due to a combination of demanding roles, college athlete peer subcultures that value athletics over academics, poor academic performance, and a lack of reinforcement around academic accomplishments. Student-athletes face increasing demands and pressures due to more rigid scheduling, greater academic expectations, and exhausting training and competitions (Jolly, 2008; Lu, Hsu, Chan, Cheen, & Kao, 2012). Thus, student-athletes likely experience more conflict between their roles than in the past.

The conflict student-athletes experience may depend on the salience of their different identities. There is scant research, however, on the connection between identity salience and conflict among college student-athletes. Settles and colleagues (2002) found that greater identification with being an athlete was associated with more role interference at one university; the authors did not consider student identity. With a related, but different focus, Killea-Jones (2005) examined student-athletes' valuation of their roles, rather than identity salience. They found that student-athletes who positively valued their student role were more likely to show greater convergence between the student and athlete roles.

Building on the literature, we examine both student and athlete identity salience and the relationship to identity conflict in a cross-university study. Further, unlike prior work, we consider the interaction between student and athlete identity salience on conflict. Examining this interaction allows us to identify different types of student-athletes: those who identify strongly as students and athletes, and those whose identity salience is low on one or both dimensions. Different combinations of identities may be associated with more frequent identity conflict. Based on the insights in the prior literature, we offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: The more salient the student-athlete's student identity, the less frequent his/her identity conflict.

Hypothesis 3b: The more salient the student-athlete's athlete identity, the more frequent his/her identity conflict.

Hypothesis 3c: There will be an interaction effect between athlete identity salience and student identity salience on identity conflict.

Situations of Identity Salience and Conflict

The salience of student-athletes' identities and their identity conflict likely depends on the situation. Student-athletes enact different roles across competition, training, class, studying, and interacting with various individuals and groups. Certain situations or interactions may increase the salience of a student or athlete identity, or heighten the conflict student-athletes experience in trying to fulfill the duties of multiple roles. Studies in social psychology indicate that situational factors influence identity salience and conflict (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Chattaraman, Rudd, & Lennon, 2009; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Yip, 2005). Prior research indicates that organizational context—including athletic department culture, relationships with coaches, and academic advising—has implications for student-athlete development (Andrassy, Svensson, Bruening, Huml, & Chung,

2014; Paule & Gilson, 2010). Regarding context and identity more specifically, Cooper and Cooper (2015) found that Black male student-athletes' academic disengagement and identity conflict was shaped by peers and (a lack of) reinforcement around academic accomplishments, among other factors.

There is a lack of systematic study of situation and identity for student-athletes across universities. In particular, we know little about contexts that heighten the salience of certain identities or engender conflict between them. Thus, in this study, we use qualitative data from student-athletes across universities to uncover themes around situations of identity salience and conflict. We address the following questions: When do student-athletes feel most like students, outside of class, and when they feel most like athletes, outside of competition? Further, in what situations do they experience the most identity conflict? Our study sheds light on a set of circumstances under which different facets of a student-athlete's identity are more or less salient, and enriches knowledge of the interplay between situational factors and identity salience and conflict.

Methods

Procedures

We conducted a survey of collegiate student-athletes across 17 universities in the United States, using Qualtrics survey software (<http://www.qualtrics.com/>, Provo, UT). Data collection took place from April through September of 2016. Participants were recruited by email. Respondents were invited to complete a 10–15-min online survey. We offered participants the option to enter into a raffle for a \$50 gift card (this process was managed through our institution's Human Subject Incentive Program). We distributed emails with the link to the survey to all current student-athletes at each target university. The survey was composed of three parts. The first part focused on student-athletes' identity salience and conflict, asking about their experiences in athletics and academics. The second part included open-ended questions to generate qualitative data on situations of identity salience and conflict. The final section included demographic questions. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. This study was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board, in accordance with the NCAA guidelines.

The survey response rate was around 15%. We used two approaches to control for the threat of nonresponse bias found in sport management scholarship (Jordan, Walker, Kent, & Inoue, 2011). First, we compared early and late respondents, based on the theory that late respondents are most similar to nonrespondents (Jordan et al., 2011; Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001). Following prior scholars (Jordan et al., 2011; Lindner et al., 2001; Rogelberg & Luong, 1998), we defined participants who took the surveys in the last wave of responses as late respondents in this study. The results of a series of independent sample *t* tests did not show any significant difference of student [athlete] identity salience and identity conflict at .05 significance level between early and late response groups. In addition, we created an independent variable ("days to respond") and included it in the regression analyses (Jordan et al., 2011). This new variable did not yield any significant result in the mixed-effect regression equation. Therefore, we concluded that nonresponse error did not constitute a problem to the

external validity of the findings (Dooley & Linder, 2003; Jordan et al., 2011; Lindner, 2002).

Participants

Our original sample included 703 respondents (31% male, 69% female). The universities were selected to include representation across the five main collegiate athletic conferences: the Big 10 Conference (70.0%), the Big 12 Conference (8.1%), the Atlantic Coast Conference (12.5%), the Pacific-12 Conference (4.1%), and the Southeastern Conference (5.3%). The sample included athletes from 23 different sports (the most common were cross-country, football, rowing, soccer, swimming and diving, and track and field, with approximately 5–10% of our sample involved in each). Five academic classes were represented in the sample: freshman (11.3%), sophomore (28.5%), junior (25.1%), senior (32.0%), and fifth-year graduate (3.1%). The race and ethnicity of respondents included Native American (1.3%), Asian (3.5%), African American (7.6%), Hispanic (3.6%), White (82.8%), and “other” (1.2%). Approximately 68.6% of respondents reported receiving some form of scholarship. The median college cumulative grade point average (GPA) was 3.01–3.5 out of a possible 4.00.

Measures

Identity salience. Student identity salience and athlete identity salience were measured individually using 10 items adapted from existing scales (e.g., Athletic Identity Measurement Scale; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Murphy et al., 1996). Items included “Being a capable athlete [student] is central to who I am” and “I have many goals related to athletics [academics].” Responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. As an initial analysis for evaluating this multiple item scale, we used the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic and the Bartlett test of sphericity to measure for sampling adequacy (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). A KMO value that exceeds .80 is considered meritorious (Paridon, Carraher, & Carraher, 2006). For both athlete and student identity salience, the KMO values were .855 and .851. The Bartlett tests were also significant for both constructs, indicating that our sampling was adequate. Principal factor analysis yielded a one-factor solution for both constructs. Each identity salience item had factor loading more than .40. The present sample yielded a Cronbach alpha of .84 for the athlete identity measurement and .85 for the student identity measurement. Items were then averaged to construct the athlete [student] identity salience scale. In addition, we used two open-ended questions to collect qualitative data on situations of identity salience (e.g., “When do you feel most like an athlete [student] outside of class [competition]?”). We received 615 valid responses for situations of athlete identity salience, and 612 for student identity salience that yielded over 90 pages of qualitative data for further coding.

Identity conflict. Identity conflict was assessed with the question, “How frequently do you feel a conflict between your role as a student and your role as an athlete?”. Participants used a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very

frequently) to respond to the item. *Situations of identity conflict* were measured through an open-ended question (e.g., “Please provide an example of a time when you felt conflict between your role as a student and your role as athlete.”). We obtained 638 valid responses for situations of identity conflict that generated over 45 pages of qualitative data for detailed coding.

Individual and organizational characteristics. We included four key individual and organizational background variables to test their effects on identity salience: individual academic [athletic] performance, and organizational academic [athletic] ranking. *Individual academic performance* was measured using GPA grouped into five ordinal subsets (<2.0; 2.0–2.5; 2.51–3.0; 3.01–3.5; 3.51–4.0). This was treated as a continuous variable. *Individual athletic performance* was measured dichotomously by asking respondents whether they were a top performer on the team. We used the education rankings provided by *U.S. News & World Report* (<https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges>) to account for *organizational academic ranking*, and the athletic rankings offered by Niche (<https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/best-college-athletics/>) to measure for *organizational athletic ranking*. We chose the Niche athletic ranking because this variable was calculated based on a comprehensive list of factors, including student surveys on athletics, athletic department revenue, conference and division revenue, performance on major national championships, average head coach salary, and athletic participation rates.

Controls. We included several control variables in the analyses. Demographic controls included *sex* (male/female), *family income* (less than \$50,000; \$50,000–\$74,999; \$75,000–\$99,999; \$100,000–\$149,999; \$150,000–\$199,999; more than \$200,000), and *race* (which we grouped into White/non-White). To control for the potential effect of *career aspiration* on identity salience and conflict, we included a dummy measure by asking respondents whether they wanted to become a professional athlete or not after graduation. Further, a dummy variable of *revenue vs. nonrevenue sport* was also included to control for the potential impact of “the climate of different sports” (Poux & Fry, 2015, p. 370) on identity salience and conflict.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis. We tested our hypotheses using general linear mixed-effect modeling (also called multilevel model or hierarchical model), adding university as a random effect. The mixed-effect model is appropriate because it allows for the combination of individual and aggregate levels in one analysis (Duncan, Jones, & Moon, 1996). A mixed-effects model consists of two parts, fixed effects and random effects. All of the explanatory variables were included in the model as fixed effects. Universities were included as random effects. We also included demographics, career aspiration, and revenue/nonrevenue generating sport as controls in all models.

For hypotheses H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b, the dependent variable was student [athlete] identity salience and the key predictors were individual academic [athletic] performance and organizational academic [athletic] ranking.

$$\text{StuIdentitySalience}_{im} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{GPA}_{im} + \beta_2 \text{AcaRanking}_{im} + u_o \text{University}_m + \varepsilon_{im}$$

$$\text{AthIdentitySalience}_{im} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{TopPerformer}_{im} + \beta_2 \text{AthRanking}_{im} + u_o \text{University}_m + \varepsilon_{im}$$

$$i = 1, 2, \dots, n, \quad m = 1, 2, \dots, M, \quad u_{om} \sim N(0, \sigma_m^2), \quad \varepsilon_{im} \sim N(0, \sigma_m^2)$$

where i represents a student-athlete, m represents a university, β_1 and β_2 are the coefficients of key independent variables, and $u_o \text{University}_m$ refers to the random effects.

For hypotheses H3a, H3b, and H3c, the dependent variable was identity conflict and the key predictors were student identity salience, athlete identity salience, and their interaction. The mixed-effect model is written as follows:

$$\text{IdentityConflict}_{im} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{StuIdentitySalience}_{im} + \beta_2 \text{AthIdentitySalience}_{im} + \beta_3 \text{Stu} * \text{AthIdentitySalience}_{im} + u_o \text{University}_m + \varepsilon_{im}$$

$$i = 1, 2, \dots, n, \quad m = 1, 2, \dots, M, \quad u_{om} \sim N(0, \sigma_m^2), \quad \varepsilon_{im} \sim N(0, \sigma_m^2)$$

Qualitative analysis. We used an inductive approach to analyze the qualitative data on situations of identity salience and conflict (Yin, 2009). That is, we did not apply preexisting theoretical constructs in our analysis. In the first step of our analysis, the three authors and a research assistant reviewed participant responses independently and then compared insights, identifying recurring themes and resolving discrepancies. Thus, our procedure included analyst triangulation, minimizing the influence of biases (Patton, 2002).

Step one yielded an initial set of codes and subcodes. These were refined in subsequent iterations of reviewing the data. For situations of student and athlete identity salience, key inductive codes and subcodes included the following: settings (e.g., athletic, academic, social), activities (athletic, academic, social, volunteering), appearance (look a certain way-dress, physical fitness), and interactions with others (e.g., athletes, family/friends, classmates, community, fans, coaches, professors). For situations of identity conflict, key inductive codes included settings (athletic, academic, social), decision conflict (e.g., study, sleep, train, compete, class), emotional work (e.g., stress, anxiety), interactions with others (e.g., with nonathlete students, with professors), and exclusion of opportunity (e.g., low level, moderate level, high level).

In the second step of the qualitative analysis, the coding scheme was applied to the entire data corpus. The process started with three researchers coding a random sample of 100 responses (10% of collected responses), with at least two researchers coding the same responses. For each response, researchers independently recorded the presence (1) or absence (0) of each of the codes derived in step one. In order to assess intercoder reliability, we calculated Krippendorff's alpha (also known as Kalpha) for each code (De Swert, 2012; Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Krippendorff's alpha is considered as a rigorous index that measures agreement among multiple coders (Krippendorff, 2004; Poetz & Schreier, 2012). A Kalpha with a value of .80 or greater denotes a good strength of reliability (Hayes &

Krippendorff, 2007; Krippendorff, 2004). We used the SPSS program (IBM Inc., Armonk, NY) and the Kalpha macro developed by Hayes (2005) to run these tests. The average Kalpha coefficients for situations of student [athlete] identity salience and identity conflict were .94, .92, and .81, respectively. On average, researchers agreed on over 90% of recording units, thus one researcher performed the remainder of the coding and consulted with the other researchers in situations of ambiguity.

In the third step, we identified themes around situations of identity salience and conflict. Two researchers went back to the data around the most prevalent codes. This was done independently, at first, and then researchers discussed and compared insights around emergent themes. Our analysis revealed main themes for student identity salience and athlete identity salience, as well as several subthemes. For situations of identity conflict, we compared responses between student-athletes who reported low and high levels of conflict. We divided identity conflict into low (1–2) and high levels (4–5), based on the quantitative measure. This analysis uncovered three main themes. Based on our quantitative findings around the interaction between identity salience and identity conflict, we also analyzed how situations of identity conflict varied by different levels of identity salience. We created categories of high and low athlete [student] identity salience based on the quantitative data, using the mean plus one standard deviation as the cutoff. Finally, we assessed how situations of identity salience and conflict differed depending on the independent variables of interest: individual academic and athletic performance and university academic and athletic ranking. We presented and received feedback on qualitative findings, at various stages of our analysis, at academic forums where participants included current and former athletes.

Findings

Regression diagnostics (i.e., the variance inflation factor) yielded no values greater than 3, which makes multicollinearity less of a concern. In general, student-athlete respondents reported relatively high levels of athlete identity salience ($M = 5.26$, $SD = .90$); about 55% of respondents identified themselves as a top performer on the team or in their sport and around 24% of respondents indicated that they planned to pursue professional sport careers after graduation. Student-athlete respondents also reported, on average, moderately high levels of student identity salience ($M = 4.60$, $SD = .90$); 64% of respondents' self-reported GPAs were above 3.0, on a 4-point scale. On average, participants experienced relatively high levels of identity conflict ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.00$). The random effects were not statistically significant. Based on our findings around student-athletes' identity salience and conflict, we developed a conceptual model of the relationships between identity constructs (Figure 1).

Identity Salience

The results of the mixed-effect models are presented in Table 1. Model 1 tested the effects of student-athletes' academic performance and their universities' academic ranking on student identity salience. Hypothesis 1a predicted a positive

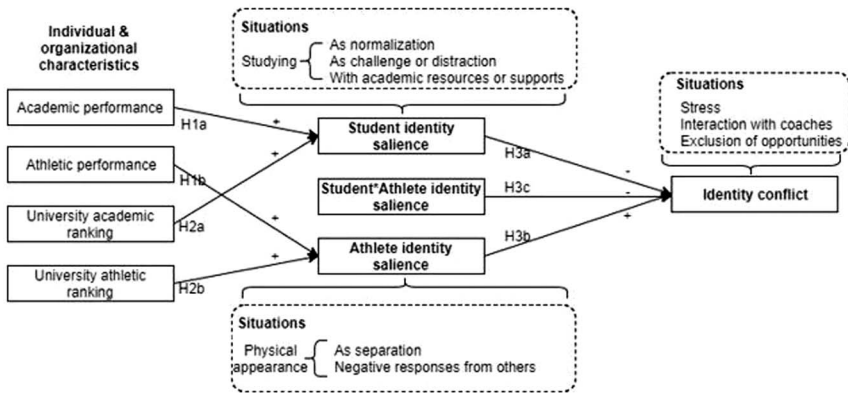


Figure 1 — Conceptual model of the relationships between identity constructs.

relationship between GPA and student identity salience. The results provide strong support for H1a. The coefficient for GPA is positive and significant at .001 level. Thus, student-athletes who earned higher GPAs were more likely to have stronger student identity salience. Furthermore, in line with Hypothesis 2a, the estimated coefficient for organizational academic ranking is positive and statistically significant at .05 level. Thus, students who attended higher academic ranking universities were more likely to report greater student identity salience.

Model 2 tested the relationship between student-athlete athletic performance and university athletic rankings on athlete identity salience. Hypothesis 1b predicted a positive relationship between athletic performance and athlete identity salience. The results show that the coefficient for top performer is positive and significant at .001 level. Thus, student-athletes who were top performers were more likely to have greater athlete identity salience. In addition, consistent with Hypothesis 2b, our results provide moderate support for organizational athletic ranking on athlete identity salience. The coefficient for athletic ranking is positive and significant at .10 level. Thus, students from higher athletic ranking universities tended to report greater athlete identity salience.

Several of the controls are also significant predictors of identity salience. The coefficient for career aspiration indicates a positive effect on student identity salience and a negative effect on athlete identity salience. Thus, student-athletes who reported a desire to become professional athletes tended to have greater athlete identity salience, while those who did not have aspirations of going professional were more likely to identify strongly as students. Sex has a moderate effect on student identity salience, such that male student-athletes are more likely to identify as students. In addition, the coefficient of race signals a negative effect on student identity salience. Compared with White student-athletes, non-White student-athletes identify more as students.

Taken together, the results in Model 1 and 2 suggest that individual background variables with respect to academic [athletic] performance and career aspiration are significantly associated with student-athletes' identity salience

Table 1 Mixed-Effect Regression Model

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
GPA	.30*** (.04)	-.08* (.04)	-.08+ (.05)	-.07 (.05)
Top performer	-.11+ (.07)	.39*** (.07)	-.03 (.08)	-.02 (.08)
Academic ranking	-.004* (.001)	-.002 (.001)	.001 (.002)	.00 (.00)
Athletic ranking	.002 (.002)	.003+ (.002)	-.001 (.002)	-.00 (.00)
Career aspiration	.38*** (.08)	-.42*** (.08)	.28** (.10)	.29** (.10)
Sex	-.13+ (.08)	-.03 (.08)	.09 (.09)	.10 (.09)
Race	-.29*** (.09)	.08 (.09)	-.13 (.10)	-.14 (.10)
Family income	-.01 (.02)	.03 (.13)	-.01 (.03)	-.010 (.03)
Revenue sport	-.07 (.15)	-.18 (.15)	.38* (.17)	.37* (.17)
Athlete ID salience			.10* (.04)	.42* (.17)
Student ID salience			.004 (.04)	.39* (.19)
Athlete*student ID salience				-.07* (.04)
Likelihood ratio	-878.63	-879.97	-986.60	-984.54
Wald x	98.10***	89.69***	19.77*	24.01*
N	703	703	703	703

Abbreviations: GPA = grade point average; ID = identity.

Note. Significance tests are two-tail for controls and one-tail for hypothesized effects. Standard errors are in parentheses. In Model 1 and 2, the dependent variables are student [athlete] identity salience. In Model 3 and 4, the dependent variable is identity conflict.

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

(student and athlete). Our results also provide support for the relationship between organizational ranking and identity salience.

Situations of Identity Salience

Student identity salience. An overarching theme we identified regarding situations of student identity salience was studying. Student-athletes in our study (70.9%) reported feeling most like students outside of class when they were working on class assignments and studying for exams. Within this broader theme, we found three subthemes: studying as normalization, studying as distraction and

challenge, and studying within structures and resources for athletes. Regarding the first subtheme, student-athletes reported feeling like students when they studied and worked on class assignments, because this activity made them feel like typical students. This subtheme was also characterized by the absence of, and separation with, athletics, as well as interactions with students who were not athletes. The quotes below illustrate the theme of studying as normalization.

“I feel most like a student when my practice is over and I finally have time to sit down and organize my workload and get started on the assignments I have. I think downtime is when I feel most like a normal student.”

“I feel most like a student when I am in the library studying or when I am participating in a study group. I think this is because I am surrounded by few, if any, athletes and all regular students. It’s nice to be seen as someone’s equal in the academic world.”

Regarding the second subtheme, another set of student-athletes reported that they felt most like students when struggling to study in the midst of training and competing. Whereas studying in the prior subtheme was about normalization, here it was characterized as stressful, a challenge, and a distraction. One respondent wrote he or she felt most like a student, *“When I’m traveling to a tournament and am doing work in the van for the whole time.”* Another responded, *“[When I] feel the pressure of tests or assignments loom over my thoughts during practice or even an important game weekend.”* Thus, unlike the prior subtheme, in this subtheme, athletics featured prominently. Similarly, in the third subtheme, athletics were the focus, but, in this case, student-athletes referenced activities designed to support student-athletes with academics. In particular, student-athletes reported feeling most like students when they were engaged in the activities such as academic tutoring or at the student-athlete academic centers: *“I have felt most like a student outside of class when going to tutor sessions. My tutors really challenge me to delve deeper into my class subjects and really challenge myself.”* Interestingly, we did not find any variation in the subthemes of studying, based on academic or athletic performance.

Athlete identity salience. Our analysis of situations of athlete identity salience revealed a theme around physical appearance. Student-athletes in our sample (39.05%) reported that they felt most like athletes, outside of competition, due to dress or appearance. In particular, team apparel and physical fitness served as visible markers of athletics and athleticism. As one respondent noted, *“professors automatically assume I am an athlete because of the clothes I wear or how I may appear”*, and another stated, *“When I wear the gear to class . . . it puts a stamp on one’s back that they are an athlete.”*

Student-athletes experienced both separation and attention from others on campus related to their physical appearance. In terms of separation, respondents expressed: *“. . . we are given all the free gear to wear around campus. I feel like it separates us from all the other students”*, and *“I’m always walking around in school sponsored athletic clothes . . . I stick out like a sore thumb”*. Student-athletes also described how their team apparel—signifying their status as athletes—attracted attention and shaped the way others interacted with them. We found that sometimes

this interaction was positive for student-athletes, such as when they received admiration or praise. One student noted, “. . . walking around campus in the team issued gear, it is really easy to notice who the athletes are, which is kind of nice because it helps you stand out from the crowd . . . I have people ask for my autograph.” Top athletic performers were more likely to reference attention received from looking like an athlete in a positive or neutral sense.

Our findings, however, suggest that, often, student-athletes felt that dressing in team apparel had negative implications for the way they are treated by professors and classmates: “In class everyone notices your gear and they always ask about your sport . . . people know that you’re on a team and they treat you differently off the field.” Some student-athletes even reported that they choose not to wear their team apparel to be taken more seriously as a student, as the quote below reflects. Respondents with high academic performance were more likely to reference the negative aspects of a differentiating physical appearance.

“I don’t wear my gear to classes, especially the upper level ones. There’s a stigma surrounding student-athletes that they either aren’t smart or didn’t earn their spot here. I’d rather be known for my academic valor in class (no gear, I don’t tell people I do sports) and keep athletics on [athletic campus] if possible.”

Additional evidence of the themes we identified for situations of identity salience can be found in Table 2.

Identity Conflict

Model 3 tested the effects of identity salience on identity conflict. As predicted in Hypothesis 3a, the estimated coefficient of athlete identity salience indicates a positive and statistically significant effect. Holding other variables constant, a one-unit increase in identity salience as an athlete results in a .10 unit increase in identity conflict. Thus, student-athletes who identify strongly as athletes experience frequent identity conflict. Contrary to the prediction in Hypothesis H3b, we found little support for the relationship between student identity salience and identity conflict.

Our results further indicate a significant interaction between student identity salience and athlete identity salience in the relationship to identity conflict. Model 4 incorporated the interaction term and the coefficient is negative and significant, in line with Hypothesis 3c. As shown in Figure 2, we found that student-athletes who identify strongly as athletes experience frequent identity conflict, regardless of their student identity salience. Further, student-athletes who identify strongly as students experience frequent conflict, irrespective of their athlete identity. In other words, strongly identifying as either an athlete or student (or both) is associated with frequent identity conflict. The biggest difference in identity conflict is among students who identify weakly as athletes; in this group, those with high student identity salience experience more frequent conflict than those with low student identity salience. As athlete identity salience increases, the difference between the identity conflict of student-athletes with high and low student identity salience decreases.

Table 2 Additional Data for Situations of Identity Salience

Situations	Additional Evidence
Student Identity Salience	
<i>Studying as normalization</i>	<p>“Never when I’m around anything football related, that’s for damn sure. Probably the only time is when I have to go to an on campus computer lab in my major’s building with other engineers who are also just as oblivious to what’s going on as myself.”</p> <p>“Going to the library versus the student-athlete success center makes me feel more like a student than an athlete.”</p>
<i>Studying as challenge or distraction</i>	<p>“Having to study for exams or complete essays while I was on the road competing in a competition or for a championship event . . . I feel academics is a distraction to my athletic performance once I am on the road.”</p> <p>“I always feel like a student because I’m always stressing out about my school work. Even at practice or social events, I commonly find myself thinking about what I have to get done by the next day or end of the weekend in terms of classwork.”</p>
<i>Studying with academic resources or supports</i>	<p>“I feel like a student whenever I attend study sessions or tutoring.”</p> <p>“I joined a club that is related to my major, which I am trying to be involved with to gain experience.”</p>
Athlete Identity Salience	
<i>Physical appearance as separation</i>	<p>“I mostly feel like an athlete when I am surrounded by my teammates in a public place. We all wear the same issued gear and talk about rowing all the time. I feel like this may make it hard for people to approach us . . .”</p> <p>“. . . I try not to wear my gear to class as well. I do not want to be associated as an athlete for the fear that I may be seen as only this in the eyes of my peers and be looked down upon for my athletic ability and not acknowledged for my academic ability.”</p>
<i>Physical appearance and responses from others</i>	<p>“Also the way nonathletes look at you/judge you when you walk in late the first day wearing all your practice stuff. They think we prioritize our sport over school.”</p> <p>“I was in a class one time and had sat with a fellow student for 6 weeks. Randomly he noticed that I had an athlete, [University] backpack and had a football tag attached to it. He immediately freaked out and proceeded to treat me differently the rest of the semester.”</p>

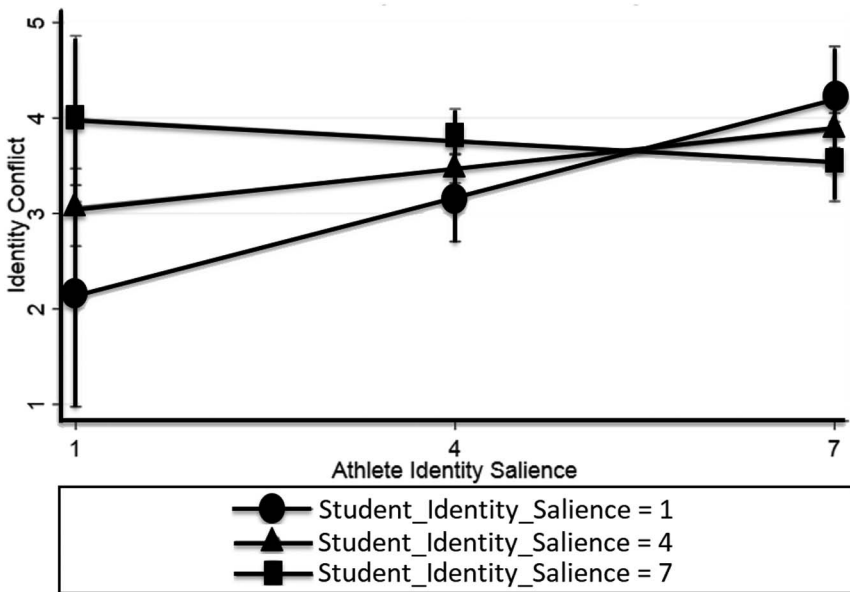


Figure 2 — Student and athlete identity salience interaction on identity conflict.

In addition, two controls—career aspiration and revenue [nonrevenue] sport—were significantly and positively related to identity conflict. These results indicate that student-athletes without the intention of becoming professional athletes and those that play revenue-generating sports are more likely to experience identity conflict.

Situations of Identity Conflict

We compared situations of identity conflict between student-athletes who reported high levels of conflict between their student identity and athlete identity and those who reported low levels of conflict. We identified three main themes. Student-athletes with high identity conflict were more likely to describe situations involving stress, interactions with coaches, and the exclusion of opportunities. In terms of stress, respondents wrote about the mental and emotional struggles of balancing or enacting multiple roles. Often, stress stemming from these roles related to sleep and exhaustion. Responses suggest student-athletes with high identity conflict struggle with deciding if and when to get more sleep versus practicing and studying. The quotes below recount situations in which student-athletes felt conflict between being a student and athlete.

“I couldn’t keep myself awake to study for a quiz that I needed to prepare for because of exhaustion and knowing I had to wake up at 5:45am to go to lift and practice the next morning. I usually know when my roles are conflicted because they cause me to stress a lot and I underperform.”

“There are many times when I know I need to be getting more schoolwork done and I should stay up later to do more, but I also know that I need to get adequate sleep in order to perform well athletically. This is an everyday occurrence for me and causes me a lot of stress.”

“When I had an exam to study for and I chose to attend practice even though I was so overwhelmed with stress, because I felt obligated to maintain my spot on the team.”

“I was chosen as a finalist for an entrepreneurial competition . . . [but] I leave for California for a meet . . . I am now forced to pick one or the other and jeopardize my place on the team or my start-up that I am working on. It is an absolute head spin.”

Student-athletes with high identity conflict were also more likely to describe situations with coaches. This subtheme was characterized by contentious interactions with coaches or as coaches exacerbating student-athletes’ struggles to meet the demands of different roles: “. . . our coaches get mad if we have class and have to miss practice” and “. . . our coach said we could not ‘steamroll over’ his authority and miss practice because we had final exams.” We found that the role of coaches in situations of identity conflict was also often connected with the prior subtheme around stress, as the quote below illustrates.

“Coaches are pushing us in practice and demanding more out of us, but the team is exhausted from class all day and have stress because we have homework, group meetings and other commitments after practice that the coaches ‘understand’ but it doesn’t change.”

Finally, compared with respondents with low identity conflict, those with high identity conflict were more likely to reference the exclusion of opportunities. This theme was characterized by missing academic activities, and not being able to pursue academic areas of interest. Those with high conflict reported situations of identity conflict ranging from not being able to attend review sessions and office hours, to constraints around taking certain classes, to the inability to pursue a particular major, as the responses below indicate.

“Practice almost always conflicts with review sessions for exams and professors office hours which makes learning challenging. In addition, I feel as though I don’t have enough time to do my school work or meet with groups for projects.”

“I have a hard time scheduling classes necessary for my major . . . classes that I would enjoy to take because of conflicts with my practice schedule . . . I would also like to attend more office hours.”

“I am currently trying to pick my major and I was told I wouldn’t be able to take what I wanted due to my sport.”

We also found that the themes around situations of identity conflict varied by individual academic performance. Student-athletes with lower academic

performance were more likely to describe situations of identity conflict related to interactions with coaches. Responses included references to the relationship between lower grades and coach expectations:

“. . . the coaches don't understand why I need time off to study yet also don't understand why I have mediocre grades.”

“Our coach tells us ‘C’s get degrees’ . . . saying if you can, get an extra hour of sleep for practice instead of studying.”

Participants with higher academic performance were more likely to describe situations of identity conflict around the exclusion of opportunities. More specifically, student-athletes with high GPAs were more apt, than respondents with lower GPAs, to reference not being able to participate in academic and career-based events and programs outside the classroom, including internships, study-abroad, and student clubs: *“I sometimes wish I could be involved with more academic clubs/jobs that pertain to my major”* and *“[I felt conflict around] not being able to participate in an internship . . . because of my athletic requirements.”*

We also found that the themes around situations of identity conflict differed somewhat by university ranking and sex. Student-athletes from higher-ranked universities—in terms of both athletics and academics—and females were moderately more likely to cite identity conflict around the exclusion of opportunities.

Identity conflict by salience. We also compared situations of identity conflict by identity salience. We discovered different themes around conflict for those with high athlete identity salience and those with high student identity salience. For respondents who reported high athlete identity salience, we found that situations of conflict often related to a desire to focus on athletics, but feeling distracted by or pulled to complete academic requirements. As the quote below illustrates, our results suggest that student-athletes who identify strongly as athletes often prioritize athletics over academics.

“I think I find this conflict when I want to stay after practice to work on a skill or take a few more shots but I should be going to the academic center to get a start on my homework . . . I usually don't care if I am late to a tutor because my skills on the field are important and feel I have a limited amount of time to work on them.”

For respondents with high student identity salience, we found that situations of identity conflict related to a desire to be a good student and be recognized as such. Yet, the perception and demands of multiple roles made the aforementioned goals difficult to achieve. Our results suggest that these student-athletes prioritize their academic roles. The following quote reflects the conflict experienced by student-athletes who identify strongly as students.

“Sometimes I feel people in my classes underestimate me or think I only got into [university] because of athletics. The reality is that I wasn't even recruited, and I strongly see myself as a student participating in an extracurricular.”

These qualitative findings align with, and provide additional insight around, our quantitative results, as we discuss below. Additional evidence of the themes we identified for situations of identity conflict can be found in Table 3.

Table 3 Additional Data for Situations of Identity Conflict

Situations	Additional Evidence
Stress	<p>“There are times when you have to choose what to prioritize. There are nights when I know should be getting 8+ hours of sleep to perform at my best ability the next morning, but if I have an important paper or project, I will stay up late to focus on academics. This choice does affect my athletic performance the next day and is stressful to think about, but again, necessary.”</p> <p>“I am pre-medical so there are times when I have games or travel and I miss many lectures of my hardest classes, such as Organic Chemistry. This puts a lot of stress and anxiety on me to try and catch up to the class and teach myself the material.”</p>
Interactions with coaches	<p>“Student-athlete isn’t a real term at the athletic department. My coach values athletics over academics even though he says he wants us to study and go to class. It’s not realistic when you have 5 hours of training every day.”</p> <p>“Pressure from coaches to take classes that do not conflict with practice times, even when it’s the only time the class is offered and it is required for your major. A major amount of guilt from having to take the required class.”</p>
Exclusion of opportunities	<p>“Not being able to put as much time into my studies as some of the other students because of my athletic participation. Also not being able to participate in things like study abroad, guest lectures, or conferences.”</p> <p>“There’s always a conflict when choosing which classes to take and how they’ll fit in with practice. I’ve missed out on a number of classes I’m quite interested in due to such scheduling issues.”</p>
. . . when high athlete identity salience	<p>“Every single day, having to sacrifice athletic time for student time is the worst part of my day. Or when I’m done with practices/games for the day and have to do homework/study.”</p> <p>“When I’m at a big track meet and have exams and homework I tend to put it off because my competition comes first and I don’t want to be distracted from winning.”</p>

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Situations	Additional Evidence
. . . when high student identity salience	<p>“I feel like sometimes it is hard to dedicate yourself 100% with practice whenever I have tests and other things on my mind. If I have an exam that day, I tend to not be as engaged in my training because I know in the end academics is going to build me a future, and athletics is not.”</p> <p>“Constantly. It is very difficult to balance a biochemistry degree, medical school aspirations, and demanding coaches. It feels like it is impossible to give 100 percent to all three. I have to be careful with how I allocate my time and I feel like each time commitment is a trade off with something only marginally less important.”</p>

Discussion

This study yields findings that add important nuance to our understanding of student-athlete identity salience and conflict. Our results indicate that organizational and individual factors are associated with identity salience. Further, student-athletes with high student and/or athlete identity salience experience identity conflict, but our qualitative data suggest that the situations of identity conflict are different across these groups. Below, we discuss the contributions of our findings to the literature on student-athlete identity and the implications of this study for administrators.

Student-Athlete Identity Salience

Very little research looks across universities at the relationship between organizational factors and student-athlete identity; yet, we know that in other settings, organizational variables play a significant role in shaping individual identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). We found support for the relationship between organizational academic and athletic rankings and student-athlete identity salience. More specifically, our results suggest that student-athletes at higher academic [athletic] ranking universities are more likely to identify strongly as students [athletes]. These results add new insight to the relationship between organizational factors and student-athlete identity. Whereas Sturm and colleagues (2011) did not find a significant relationship between university athletic division (i.e., Division I and III) and student-athlete identity salience, we find effects for rankings (for universities within the same division) with a much larger sample across multiple universities.

Our findings around organizational context can be understood through the lens of organizational culture: individuals learn and perpetuate patterns of beliefs, values, and behavioral expectations through socialization and motivational processes (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Pascale, 1985). Universities with higher academic [athletic] rankings may signal, or embody, values and competencies around academics [athletics], through demonstrating, training, and rewarding certain

behaviors. Another explanation for our findings is that student-athletes self-select into universities with values and capabilities that align with the individuals' existing identities. This rationale aligns with research on person-organization fit: the congruence between the individual's values and their perceptions of recruiting organizations' values predicts organizational entry (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1996). Future research should continue to explore the role of organizational context for student-athletes, including examining the influence of particular structures (e.g., practices, rules and policies) and resources.

Prior work on the influence of individual factors on student-athlete identity salience identified the role of sex (Harrison et al., 2009; Sturm et al., 2011) and year in college (Chen et al., 2010). Our results shed new light on the relationship between individual performance and student-athlete identity. In particular, we found that academic performance was a positive and significant predictor of student identity salience, and that athletic performance predicted athlete identity salience. As student-athletes excel in one area, the positive reinforcement they receive likely leads to identifying more strongly with that role. Being rewarded or praised with, for example, wins or good grades, may increase an individual's self-efficacy, or "one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task" (Bandura, 1994, p. 71). Efficacy, in turn, shapes identity: individuals identify more strongly with roles they succeed in fulfilling (Stets & Burke, 2000). Our results around individual factors and identity salience complement and extend Adler and colleagues' (1987) participant observation at a single university. Whereas that early study suggested that poor grades may lead to a decrease in college athletes' student roles, our larger-scale, quantitative study found a positive relationship between academic performance and student identity salience. Going beyond prior work, we identified a positive relationship between athletic performance and athlete identity salience.

In addition to examining the role of individual and organizational factors in student-athlete identity, this study provides valuable insights into contexts and situations that may enhance the salience of certain identities. Our findings around situations of athlete identity salience reveal a theme around physical appearance. Student-athletes described how they felt most like athletes when they wore athletic apparel and team gear, and that this "dress" separated them from classmates, drew attention, and shaped the way others behaved toward the student-athlete. These findings align with the perspective that "dress" is an important artifact of culture that helps create a shared team identity or in-group (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Schein, 1990), and that specialized dress can differentiate or divide individuals and groups from others (i.e., the outgroup). As reflected in the findings above, dress is a visible marker of a group (student-athletes) and thus allows (sometimes negative) stereotypes to manifest.

We found more variation around situations of student identity salience. At a higher level, we identified a common theme around studying. However, lower order codes revealed more nuance: some student-athletes viewed studying as a chance to feel like "normal" students, whereas others saw it as a distraction from competing athletically, or as an activity that was done within the context of athletic department supports. These findings extend prior work, noting important differences in student-athletes' academic experiences, including the benefits and challenges they face while attending college (Bell, 2009; Paule & Gilson, 2010).

Student-Athlete Identity Conflict

Identity conflict has important implications for student-athletes' task performance, career, and mental health (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Settles et al., 2002; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). However, previous research suggested that student-athlete identity conflict was not very high (Killeya-Jones, 2005; Settles et al., 2002). By contrast, we discovered that identity conflict, on average, is moderately high. Notably, our sample size was much larger than those in other studies and included individuals from multiple universities. Further, and perhaps more importantly, our research was conducted more recently—more than a decade later. A number of scholars and practitioners suggest that student-athletes are facing currently significant demands, based on their multiple roles, and that these pressures have increased over time (Jolly, 2008; Lu et al., 2012). Our findings provide additional support for these arguments.

We found that student-athletes with higher identity conflict described situations of identity conflict involving stress. These findings align with research that demonstrates higher identity conflict is linked to worse mental health and wellness outcomes for student-athletes (Killeya-Jones, 2005; Settles et al., 2002). Our results also suggest that many student-athletes experience identity conflict and stress in situations where they must decide between sleeping, studying, and practicing. Student-athletes describe a “catch-22”: do they sacrifice athletic performance (e.g., by studying late and not getting enough sleep) or academic performance (e.g., by skipping homework and going to bed early)? Correspondingly, participants reference tiredness and exhaustion around this dynamic. This finding speaks to the more prominent sleep deprivation problem in the student-athlete population (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009; Fullagar et al., 2015) and further indicates that athletic departments need to pay closer attention to student-athlete sleep patterns.

Our findings also reveal that student-athletes experience identity conflict in interactions with coaches and through the exclusion of opportunities. Coaches may cause or exacerbate the conflict student-athletes experience as they try to meet the demands of their different roles. Further, our results indicate that there are different types of exclusion, including classroom-based and extracurricular, and different levels of exclusion that range from a low level (e.g., missing office hours and review sessions), to a moderate level (e.g., the inability to register for certain classes), to a high level (e.g., being deterred from selecting certain majors that may be of interest). Our findings also suggest that situations of identity conflict vary by individual academic performance. Academic high-performers were more likely to experience conflict over exclusion from opportunities outside the classroom, such as internships and clubs. High-achievers likely desire participation in activities that have implications for their careers and professional growth. Low academic achievers were more likely to reference interactions with coaches as situations of identity conflict. Coaches' expectations were cited as a factor in respondents' grades. Those with lower grades may perceive that coaches expect them to put athletics above academics and/or that the athletic demands of coaches are deterrents to studying. The findings around situations of identity conflict have important practical implications, as discussed below.

Student-Athlete Identity Salience and Conflict

Few studies look at student-athlete identity salience and conflict, and none consider athlete and student identity salience and the interaction between them (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1987, 1991; Settles et al., 2002). By examining all three identity aspects, we demonstrate the implications of different identity combinations for conflict. In particular, our results suggest that student-athletes who identify strongly as students and/or athletes experience frequent identity conflict, regardless of the salience of the other identity. Thus, student-athletes who are significantly invested in their academic career and/or their athletic career likely face regular conflict. Identity conflict is less frequent for those who weakly identify as both students and athletes. These individuals are perhaps not strongly driven to be top performers in either academics or athletics. Notably, however, very few (3.2%) student-athletes in our study fell into this category.

Although student-athletes who identify strongly as students and those who identify strongly as athletes both experience identity conflict, our qualitative findings suggest that the conflict is different. In particular, our findings around situations of identity conflict suggest that student-athletes who identify strongly as athletes experience conflict due to feeling distracted by or pulled to complete academic requirements. By contrast, student-athletes who identify strongly as students seem to experience identity conflict because of a desire to be strong students, and be recognized as such. Yet, they must also meet the demands of athletics and are perceived (not always positively) as athletes.

Practical Implications

Our findings have implications for universities and athletic departments, including administrators, coaches, and faculty. The positive association we identified between student-athletes' academic performance and identification as students suggests that, to promote student-athletes' investment in their student role, universities should consider different ways of recognizing academic performance. In addition to more typical athlete-scholar awards based on GPA, faculty and athletic departments should consider opportunities to recognize academic achievements that are more incremental or that signal progress. This recognition can be informal, such as faculty sending a note of praise to a student who contributed valuable insight to a class discussion, or more formal, such as an award that recognizes academic improvement. These types of practices allow more student-athletes to be acknowledged and align with our qualitative data that suggest many student-athletes want to be recognized for their academic achievements.

Our findings around the role of dress suggest that coaches and administrators should weigh the benefits and risks of requiring or promoting athletic apparel in different situations. Athletic apparel can reinforce athlete and team identity, but also draw (often unwanted) attention to student-athletes, particularly high academic performers, and create separation between them and the rest of the student body. Faculty should also consider how their behavior toward students is shaped by students' dress, and whether they as faculty have (implicit) biases towards student-athletes. Our study helps show that there is no "typical" student-athlete—there are differences across student-athletes in terms of their identities and

experiences. Many student-athletes want to be “normal” students and some expressed real concern about how being identified as a student-athlete negatively shaped interactions with faculty and fellow students.

Athletic departments should also be aware of variation across the student-athlete population in designing and implementing structures and practices. In particular, our results indicate that some student-athletes want more integration with the student body (opportunities to feel like “normal” students), rather than separate resources and structures (e.g., student-athlete academic centers). Other students expressed significant frustration with and stress around managing the responsibilities of their student identity, including studying and completing coursework, and training and competing in their sport, while trying to get adequate sleep. These student-athletes would perhaps benefit from additional athletic department resources and supports.

In terms of mitigating student-athlete identity conflict, our findings suggest that universities and athletic departments should consider how policies and practices result in student-athletes’ exclusion from academic opportunities. Scheduling conflicts and restrictive or prohibitive policies for academic majors, for example, could perhaps be reduced through increased communication and coordination between academic programs and athletic departments. Coaches should also be aware of their part in potentially promoting or exacerbating the conflict student-athletes experience as they try to meet the demands of different roles. Overall, it behooves universities and athletic departments to continuously evaluate the situations in which student-athletes are placed and identify opportunities to reduce conflicts.

Limitation and Future Directions

Future research should address the following limitations and suggestions. First, although our sampling included 17 universities with the goal of representing a diverse group of student-athletes, most of our participants were drawn from the Power Five conferences (e.g., Big Ten, Big 12, Pacific-12, Atlantic Coast, and Southeastern). These conferences are known for placing a strong emphasis on athletics. Thus, our findings may not generalize to smaller and less athletically strong conferences and divisions. More research is needed to examine the precursors and effects of student-athlete identity salience and conflict at universities that tend to have fewer resources and support for athletics.

A second limitation of our study concerns the representativeness of our sample. Compared with the NCAA Division I student-athlete population ([NCAA Sport Sponsorship, Participation, and Demographics Search, 2016](#)), our sample included an overrepresentation of female and White student-athletes, and those from the following sports: cross-country, rowing, and swimming and diving. Males, African-Americans, and basketball and baseball players were underrepresented in our sample, based on the NCAA population. Future research should attempt to collect data from more diverse samples and examine how race, sex, and sport played influence student-athletes’ identity salience and conflict. For instance, an African-American male who plays basketball may experience different situations of identity conflict than a White female who runs cross-country. These differences could have implications for athletic department staff and university faculty.

In this study, our main organizational-level variable of interest was university ranking (athletic and academic). Future research could look at the effect of additional organizational factors on student-athletes' identities. For example, studies might consider the influence of organizational culture (including within the athletic department and across the university), academic and support resources for student-athletes (e.g., tutors, academic centers, counselors), and student-athlete housing (i.e., whether athletes live with the general student population). Lastly, as with most survey methodology, there are potential biases associated with self-reporting. In particular, in our study, the variable of individual athletic performance was assessed subjectively by asking respondents to classify whether they were a top performer on the team. With this approach, there is a potential for social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993; King & Bruner, 2000). Future research should consider the use of both subjective and objective measurement of student-athletes' performance.

Conclusion

The bifurcated identity of student athletes as “students” and “athletes” has been the subject of prior work. With quantitative and qualitative data on student-athletes across multiple universities, our study adds important nuance to understanding student-athlete identity. Organizational and individual factors shape student-athletes' identities, and student-athletes experience identity conflict, but in different ways. The findings of this study inform policies regarding collegiate athletics, including how to address the needs of student-athletes and promote greater inclusiveness in the student experience.

References

- Adler, P., & Adler, P.A. (1987). Role conflict and identity salience: College athletics and the academic role. *The Social Science Journal*, 24(4), 443–455. doi:[10.1016/0362-3319\(87\)90059-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0362-3319(87)90059-0)
- Adler, P.A., & Adler, P. (1991). *Backboards & blackboards: College athletics and role engulfment*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Andrassy, E.J., Svensson, P., Bruening, J., Huml, M.R., & Chung, M. (2014). The role of organizational capacity in student-athlete development. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 7(2), 218–244. doi:[10.1123/jis.2014-0103](https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.2014-0103)
- Aquino, K., Freeman, D., Reed, A., Lim, V.K., & Felps, W. (2009). Testing a social-cognitive model of moral behavior: The interactive influence of situations and moral identity centrality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(1), 123–141. PubMed ID: [19586244](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19586244/) doi:[10.1037/a0015406](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015406)
- Armstrong, S., & Oomen-Early, J. (2009). Social connectedness, self-esteem, and depression symptomatology among collegiate athletes versus nonathletes. *Journal of American College Health*, 57(5), 521–526. PubMed ID: [19254893](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19254893/) doi:[10.3200/JACH.57.5.521-526](https://doi.org/10.3200/JACH.57.5.521-526)
- Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V.S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 71–81). New York, NY: Academic Press. (Reprinted from *Encyclopedia of mental health*, by H. Friedman Ed., San Diego, CA: Academic Press)

- Bell, L.F. (2009). Examining academic role-set influence on the student-athlete experience. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 19(4), 19–41.
- Brewer, B.W., Van Raalte, J.L., & Linder, D.E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel? *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 24, 237–254.
- Brown, C., Glastetter-Fender, C., & Shelton, M. (2000). Psychosocial identity and career control in college student-athletes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 56(1), 53–62. doi:10.1006/jvbe.1999.1691
- Brown, C., & Hartley, D.L. (1998). Athletic identity and career maturity of male college student athletes. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 29(1), 17–26.
- Cable, D.M., & Judge, T.A. (1996). Person–organization fit, job choice decisions, and organizational entry. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 67(3), 294–311. doi:10.1006/obhd.1996.0081
- Chattaraman, V., Rudd, N.A., & Lennon, S.J. (2009). Identity salience and shifts in product preferences of Hispanic consumers: Cultural relevance of product attributes as a moderator. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(8), 826–833. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.04.002
- Chen, S., Snyder, S., & Magner, M. (2010). The effects of sport participation on student-athletes' and non-athlete students' social life and identity. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 3(1), 176–193.
- Cooper, J.N., & Cooper, J.E. (2015). "I'm running so you can be happy and I can keep my scholarship": A comparative study of black male college athletes' experiences with role conflict. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 8(2), 131–152. doi:10.1123/jis.2014-0120
- De Swert, K. (2012). Calculating inter-coder reliability in media content analysis using Krippendorff's Alpha. *Center for Politics and Communication*, 1–15.
- Dooley, L.M., & Linder, J.R. (2003). The handling of nonresponse error. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 14(1), 99–110. doi:10.1002/hrdq.1052
- Duncan, C., Jones, K., & Moon, G. (1996). Health-related behavior in context: A multilevel modelling approach. *Social Science & Medicine*, 42(6), 817–830. PubMed ID: 8778995 doi:10.1016/0277-9536(95)00181-6
- Fisher, R.J. (1993). Social desirability bias and the validity of indirect questioning. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(2), 303–315. doi:10.1086/209351
- Frone, M.R. (2000). Work-family conflict and employee psychiatric disorders: The national comorbidity survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(6), 888–895. PubMed ID: 11155895 doi:10.1037/0021-9010.85.6.888
- Fullagar, H.H., Skorski, S., Duffield, R., Hammes, D., Coutts, A.J., & Meyer, T. (2015). Sleep and athletic performance: The effects of sleep loss on exercise performance, and physiological and cognitive responses to exercise. *Sports Medicine*, 45(2), 161–186. PubMed ID: 25315456 doi:10.1007/s40279-014-0260-0
- Gaston-Gayles, J.L. (2004). Examining academic and athletic motivation among student-athletes at a Division I University. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(1), 75–83. doi:10.1353/csd.2004.0005
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma; notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Hair, J.H., Anderson, R.E., Tatham, R.L., & Black, W. (1998). *Multivariate data analysis* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Harrison, C.K., Stone, J., Shapiro, J., Yee, S., Boyd, J.A., & Rullan, V. (2009). The role of gender identities and stereotype salience with the academic performance of male and female college athletes. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 33(1), 78–96. doi:10.1177/0193723508328902
- Hayes, A.F. (2005). *Statistical methods for communication science*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Hayes, A.F., & Krippendorff, K. (2007). Answering the call for a standard reliability measure for coding data. *Communication Methods and Measures, 1*(1), 77–89. doi:[10.1080/19312450709336664](https://doi.org/10.1080/19312450709336664)
- Hoelter, J.W. (1983). The effects of role evaluation and commitment on identity salience. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 46*(2), 140–147. doi:[10.2307/3033850](https://doi.org/10.2307/3033850)
- Hogg, M.A., & Terry, D.I. (2000). Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts. *Academy of Management Review, 25*(1), 121–140. doi:[10.2307/259266](https://doi.org/10.2307/259266)
- Jolly, J.C. (2008). Raising the question # 9 is the Student-Athlete population unique? And why should we care? *Communication Education, 57*(1), 145–151. doi:[10.1080/03634520701613676](https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520701613676)
- Jones, S.R., & McEwen, M.K. (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development, 41*(4), 405–414.
- Jordan, J.S., Walker, M., Kent, A., & Inoue, Y. (2011). The frequency of nonresponse analyses in the Journal of Sport Management. *Journal of Sport Management, 25*(3), 229–239. doi:[10.1123/jsm.25.3.229](https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.25.3.229)
- Killeya-Jones, L.A. (2005). Identity structure, role discrepancy and psychological adjustment in male college student-athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 28*(2), 167–185.
- King, M.F., & Bruner, G.C. (2000). Social desirability bias: A neglected aspect of validity testing. *Psychology & Marketing, 17*(2), 79–103. doi:[10.1002/\(SICI\)1520-6793\(200002\)17:2<79::AID-MAR2>3.0.CO;2-0](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6793(200002)17:2<79::AID-MAR2>3.0.CO;2-0)
- Krieg, D.B. (2013). High expectations for higher education? Perceptions of college and experiences of stress prior to and through the college career. *College Student Journal, 47*(4), 635–643.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lally, P.S., & Kerr, G.A. (2005). The career planning, athletic identity, and student role identity of intercollegiate student-athletes. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 76*(3), 275–285. PubMed ID: [16270705](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16270705/) doi:[10.1080/02701367.2005.10599299](https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2005.10599299)
- Lindner, J.R. (2002). Handling of nonresponse error in the Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education. *Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education, 9*(3), 55–60. doi:[10.5191/jiaee.2002.09307](https://doi.org/10.5191/jiaee.2002.09307)
- Lindner, J.R., Murphy, T.H., & Briers, G.E. (2001). Handling nonresponse in social science research. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 42*(4), 43–53. doi:[10.5032/jae.2001.04043](https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2001.04043)
- Lu, F.J., Hsu, Y., Chan, Y., Cheen, J., & Kao, K. (2012). Assessing college student-athletes life stress: Initial measurement development and validation. *Measurement in Physical Education and Exercise Science, 16*(4), 254–267. doi:[10.1080/1091367X.2012.693371](https://doi.org/10.1080/1091367X.2012.693371)
- Martens, M.P., & Cox, R.H. (2000). Career development in college varsity athletes. *Journal of College Student Development, 41*(2), 172–180.
- Miller, K.E., & Hoffman, J.H. (2009). Mental well-being and sport-related identities in college students. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 26*(2), 335–356. PubMed ID: [20661467](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20661467/) doi:[10.1123/ssj.26.2.335](https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.26.2.335)
- Miller, P.S., & Kerr, G.A. (2003). The role experimentation of intercollegiate student-athletes. *The Sport Psychologist, 17*(2), 196–219. doi:[10.1123/tsp.17.2.196](https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.17.2.196)
- Murphy, G.M., Petitpas, A.J., & Brewer, B.W. (1996). Identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity in intercollegiate athletes. *The Sport Psychologist, 10*(3), 239–246. doi:[10.1123/tsp.10.3.239](https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.10.3.239)
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2016). *Student-athlete data*. Retrieved from <http://web1.ncaa.org/rgdSearch/exec/saSearch>

- Paridon, T.J., Carraher, S., & Carraher, S.C. (2006). The income effect in personal shopping value, consumer self-confidence, and information sharing (word of mouth communication) research. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, 10(2), 107–124.
- Pascale, R. (1985). The paradox of “corporate culture”: Reconciling ourselves to socialization. *California Management Review*, 27(2), 26–41. doi:[10.2307/41165127](https://doi.org/10.2307/41165127)
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. New York, NY: Sage.
- Paule, A.L., & Gilson, T.A. (2010). Current collegiate experiences of big-time, non-revenue, NCAA athletes. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 3(2), 333–347. doi:[10.1123/jis.3.2.333](https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.3.2.333)
- Poetz, M.K., & Schreier, M. (2012). The value of crowdsourcing: can users really compete with professionals in generating new product ideas?. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 29(2), 245–256.
- Poux, K.N., & Fry, M.D. (2015). Athletes’ perceptions of their team motivational climate, career exploration and engagement, and athletic identity. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 9(4), 360–372. doi:[10.1123/jcsp.2014-0050](https://doi.org/10.1123/jcsp.2014-0050)
- Rogelberg, S.G., & Luong, A. (1998). Nonresponse to mailed surveys: A review and guide. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 7(2), 60–65. doi:[10.1111/1467-8721.ep13175675](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.ep13175675)
- Ross, L., & Nisbett, R.E. (1991). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Schein, E.H. (1990). Organizational culture. *American Psychologist*, 45(2), 109–119. doi:[10.1037/0003-066X.45.2.109](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.45.2.109)
- Schein, E.H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Settles, I.H., Sellers, R.M., & Damas, A., Jr. (2002). One role or two?: The function of psychological separation in role conflict. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(3), 574–582. PubMed ID: [12090615](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12090615/) doi:[10.1037/0021-9010.87.3.574](https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.3.574)
- Stets, J.E., & Burke, P.J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224–237. doi:[10.2307/2695870](https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870)
- Stryker, S. (1968). Identity salience and role performance: The relevance of symbolic interaction theory for family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 30(4), 558–564. doi:[10.2307/349494](https://doi.org/10.2307/349494)
- Sturm, J.E., Feltz, D.L., & Gilson, T.A. (2011). A comparison of athlete and student identity for Division I and Division III athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 34(3), 295–306.
- Sveningsson, S., & Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations*, 56(10), 1163–1193. doi:[10.1177/00187267035610001](https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267035610001)
- Thoits, P. (1983). Multiple identities and psychological well-being: A reformulation and test of the social isolation hypothesis. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 174–187. PubMed ID: [6859677](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/6859677/) doi:[10.2307/2095103](https://doi.org/10.2307/2095103)
- Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yip, K.-S. (2005). A multi-dimensional perspective of adolescents’ self-cutting. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 10(2), 80–86. doi:[10.1111/j.1475-3588.2005.00122.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-3588.2005.00122.x)
- Yopyk, D.J., & Prentice, D.A. (2005). Am I an athlete or a student? Identity salience and stereotype threat in student-athletes. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 27(4), 329–336. doi:[10.1207/s15324834basp2704_5](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2704_5)