

“It’s Not Just About Competition – It’s Ceremony”: Introducing the Embedded Indigeneity Framework for Understanding Identity, Mission, and Practice in TCU and NASNTI Athletics

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This study introduces the Embedded Indigeneity Framework to examine how Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) integrate Indigenous identity into athletics operations. Sport management scholarship often centers Power Five institutions and market logics, marginalizing Special Mission Institutions and their cultural foundations. As a result, institutionally specific nuances are often not considered when exploring the experiences and approaches of practitioners within these spaces. Using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Naeem et al., 2023), this study analyzes practitioner narratives to develop a framework grounded in five interconnected themes: *Cultural Representation and Recognition*, *Community Connection and Engagement*, *Educational Opportunity and Structural Support*, *Personal and Historical Identity Integration*, and *Navigating Organizational Tensions*. Guided by decolonial and social justice lenses, the framework highlights how indigeneity is not merely acknowledged but embedded across organizational life. By illuminating the relationship between identity, mission, and practice, this study expands the boundaries of sport organization scholarship and affirms the value of culturally grounded and justice-oriented approaches to intercollegiate athletics.

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In February of 2025, Haskell Indian Nations University women's basketball Coach Adam Strom was laid off due to President Donald Trump's federal workforce cuts. Instead of accepting this decision and leaving the team, he continued to coach voluntarily. Despite the adversity, Strom led the team to a conference championship. Strom exemplified for his student-athletes what it means to rise above whatever unfairness life may throw your way. Strom also emphasized how important Haskell's mission to serve Native students was to him noting 'We play for Indian Country. Indian country has endured many challenges' (Kraske & Marvine, 2025, para. 8). For Strom and many others affiliated with special mission institutions, sport and culture exceeds other higher education conventions. The context of the institution and the cultural underpinnings expressed by Strom presents the ideal opportunity and landscape to understand the relationship between indigeneity and athletics – specifically at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Native American Serving Non-Tribal Institutions (NASNTIs).

Kettle (2019) provides a much-needed explanation on the impact and importance of identity salience, also understood as the importance/centrality of identity, within the broader scope of society – often leading to grand gestures of both 'good and evil' (e.g. war, social justice movements, and similar). He argues that mainstream identity research focuses on racial and gender-based differences, often leaning towards dominant discourses, typically reinforcing predominant typologies such as men versus women or racialized groups versus whiteness. Kettle (2019) further explains that while consumption - the everyday engagement with cultural norms, practices, and symbols - is far less impactful than major social movements/disruption, identity salience is a noteworthy factor to investigate and consider within an organization. With particular attention to the impact of identity and community in the broader scope of sport and sport organizations, research should consider the broader context of identity saliency within their operations, culture, and practice. This study actively places focus solely on the salience and integration of Indigenous identity on organizational operations. In doing so, this manuscript addresses the longstanding orientation of neoliberal monoculturalism: an idea that aversion/removal of identity contributes to effectiveness, efficiency, and reflections of market driven logics (Hudson-Miles & Broadey, 2019).

Contrary to dominant discourse, the college sport landscape consists of more than the Power Five conferences – which are largely comprised of Historically and Predominantly White Institutions (HPWIs). The power conferences, also referred to as the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), consist of mostly state flagship institutions and are considered the highest levels of athletic and economic output within the college sport landscape. Framing these institutions as the normative benchmark for organizational and athletic success limits the scope and understanding of institutional types across college athletics. Consequently, this framing obscures the breadth of institutional types, missions, and community-salient operations of the remaining participating NCAA and NAIA institutions, e.g. HBCUs, HSIs, same-gender institutions, work colleges, and more. Given the social and cultural underpinnings within these institutional types, there is a considerable gap in the framing and un-

derstanding of these athletics spaces as conduits and contributors to campus culture (Foster, 2024). Within this group of institutions are Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Native American Non-Tribal Serving Institutions (NASNTIs) – which are considerably underrepresented within sport management/organization literature. The lack of consideration for institutional type and mission limits the understanding, contributions, and institutionally specific operations of these spaces. This reiterates the deficit-based framing of institutions existing outside of the Power Five norms.

As explained by Newman (2014), the broader scope of (intercollegiate) sport management/organization favors market-driven logics that often reduce or remove the impact of identity, resulting in a diminished sociocultural understanding of sport. Singer (2005) has challenged sport management/organization researchers to actively consider and center the role of race/racialized identity in their understanding, assessment, and communication of sport. Aligning with Rodrigues and colleagues (2025) who echoed a similar demand for organizational scholarship to engage in decolonial practices. This study accomplishes this by 1) amplifying Indigenous voices and perspectives, 2) centering TCUs and NASNTIs in sport organization research, and 3) engaging in a decolonial practice by implementing an inductive thematic analysis to build theory and understanding through Indigenous-centered voices. The exploration and communication of institutional type and identity through social justice and decolonial lenses are integral to expanding the scope of sport organization research.

Most of the sport research that includes Native American or Indigenous Peoples debates their presence as mascots or team names, often reducing Native Peoples to symbols and not dynamic communities (Hofman, 2005; McLean et al., 2017; Tsosie, 2016). When content is centered around Indigenous Peoples, it is often from a deficit perspective, focusing on what Native communities do not have - rather than the positives they have built for centuries (Ali-Christie, 2013; Bartolome, 1994; Faber, 2016; Paraschak & Thompson, 2014). The interconnectedness of community, resilience, strength, relationality, and abundance underscores the fundamental aspects that shape the sociological, cultural, and political identity of the Indigenous sporting experience (Ali-Joseph et al., 2023). With community and relationality being emphasized, the lack of organizational insight into athletics operations and culture is a missed opportunity.

Understanding the role of identity in the operation of organizations requires heightened attention, particularly as more institutions are built and designed around identities, communities, and deeply embedded value systems. Higher education management literature has consistently addressed the sociocultural influences on the operations and management of special mission institutions (SMIs), notably HBCUs, same gender institutions, and other Minority-Serving Institutions. These nuances impact admissions and recruitment (Lott et al. 2023; Wong et al. 2021), employee onboarding (Bingham 2018; Villarreal 2022; Wideman, 2025), community engagement (Morales, 2020), marketing and communications (Carter & Patterson, 2019; Garcia, 2019; Hudson, 2018), and other organizational areas. Conversely, college sport literature is relatively shallow when exploring and communicating the nuances

of operating within SMIs – largely due to the monolithic understanding and framing of college athletics.

To address the dearth of sociocultural nuance and understanding within college sport operations and management, the researchers seek to answer the research questions: how is Indigenous identity (i.e., indigeneity) and TCU/NASNTI status embedded within athletics operations? How do athletics operations contribute to and extend the missions of their adjoining educational institution? The contributions of this study offer a more contextualized and culturally aware understanding of how practitioners' perception and operation of these athletic spaces reflect and serve Indigenous communities through policies, practices, and sports culture. This study further asserts the relationship between the academic institution, TCU/NASNTI status, and the subsequent impact on campus culture and identity. Undergirded by the critical argument that identity is not peripheral, but an integral component of organizational practice, the findings continue to challenge the notion that athletics are largely separate from educational institutions (see Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Harry & Springer, 2025). A call for similar scholarly approaches can provide similar contributions across the wider range of SMIs. This manuscript adds to the growing body of scholarship on values and identity-based organizations, akin to Black-centric and women-led spaces, where identity and culture are foundational components of organizational identity and operations.

Literature Review

Indigenous Identity in Education

The history of Indigenous communities in the United States is a long, complicated battle between tribal sovereignty and settler colonial advancement that continues to infect current-day issues from climate change to mental health. Similarly, the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and education is also one fraught with complications, as the boarding school system enacted an ethos to “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” (Pember, 2007, p. 25). The federal government established these boarding schools, “as a part of a crusade by a coalition of reformers who aimed to assimilate Native Americans into dominant Anglo-Protestant society through education” (Bloom, 2000, p. 1). While it may not have been a physical war on Native Americans, this battle was against Native American identity and culture to achieve “mass cultural conversion” (Bloom, 2000, p. 1). Carlisle Indian School was the first off-reservation boarding school opened in 1879. These off-reservation boarding schools have become notorious for abuse and deaths, with schools commonly having cemeteries on school property. Young people were targeted as prospects to be civilized; adults were considered lost causes (Adams, 1995). An important component of boarding schools was the cultural genocide of Indigenous ways of life, resulting in historical and intergenerational trauma (Pember, 2007).

Sport and athletics, like other aspects of boarding school life, were intended to be used as another tool to “civilize” Native children. Unlike the banning of cultural traditions, sport was used by Native youth as a form of agency and identity confir-

mation (Bloom, 2000). It also provided opportunities for students to become a part of internationally recognized athletics programs that traveled to play predominantly white institutions in major cities. To note, Carlisle was a national powerhouse football program in the early twentieth century, competing against Ivy League, as well as the Army and Naval academies (Oxendine, 1995). The athletic success was overshadowed by the inhumane indoctrination of Native students and by the 1980s most Native American boarding schools were closed (Archuleta et al., 2004).

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) were established in the late 1960s, the first being Navajo Community College in 1968 (Robbins, 2002). TCUs were developed with unique missions connected to their tribal nation's culture, language, and history (Benham & Stein, 2003). These institutions were founded to help combat cultural erasure as a response to the systematic decimation of Native communities by boarding schools and assimilation policies (*History and Continued Contributions of Tribal Colleges and Universities*, 2022). TCUs provide more than just an education; they play a critical role in protecting and preserving culture while supporting Native American students who aim to contribute to their communities. These institutions provide an affordable and culturally driven education and essential community resources.

These institutions have promoted the perspective of survivance, perseverance, and resilience, rather than one of deficit and despair – emphasizing the importance of abundance over adversity. Runner and Marshall (2003) have defined resilience as ‘the natural, human capacity to navigate life well’ (p. 2). They note, ‘tribal colleges have been providing resilience-based retention strategies for years’ in the form of ‘spirituality, family strength, elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, tribal identity, and support networks’ (Runner & Marshall 2003, p. 4).

In addition to TCUs, there are also Native American Serving-Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs). These institutions gain this designation based on the demographics of their undergraduate student enrollment and not on institutional mission. As the Higher Education Act amendments of 2008 outline, public or private nonprofit institutions can apply for federal NASNTI designation and funding through Title III if the college or university meets specified enrollment and financial requirements. As of 2025, NASNTI funding requires that undergraduate students who identify as Native American make up at least 10% of total enrollment. Funding can be used for various purposes, such as developing faculty and improving student support services and academic programs – which assist in developing an unspoken culture and mission akin to TCUs. Geographically, these institutions are usually rural, remote, or small cities. Many are also located adjacent to Native communities and appeal to Native students who want to be close to home (Benally et al., 2020). In 2020, 37 institutions qualified as NASNTI. Most were public and a mix of two- and four-year institutions. Of those NASNTIs, it was estimated that 19% of students were Native American (Benally et al. 2020).

Like TCUs, NASNTIs work to create culturally responsive programs and integrate understanding of Native student identities. Both work towards new methods that are proactive and responsive to the unique social needs of Native students. Some

examples of high-impact practices for these institutions include community-based learning and internships, special learning communities, and holistic diversity learning (Benally, 2020). Ultimately, these institutions succeed by putting a culture in focus, not in a footnote.

Sport in Indigenous Communities

For Indigenous Peoples and Nations, physical activity is inherently tied to land, language, ceremony, and knowledge systems. Sports have historically been prevalent within Native American communities through creation stories, community leadership and abundance, cultural knowledge systems, the boarding school experience, and in contemporary secondary educational school settings. Physical activity and sporting practices are not only present in health and wellness but also act as protective factors and acts of generational healing for Indigenous Peoples. Running had a purpose beyond winning a race, it was a tool for survival. In addition to its importance to warfare, running assisted in hunting, gathering, trading, and delivering messages (Oxendine, 1995). Contemporary lacrosse is traced back to Indigenous stickball games that could be played between and within tribal communities for both practical and ceremonial purposes (Vennum, 2007).

Indigenous Peoples have an inherent responsibility and right to “exercising” sovereignty, which is the practice of sport and physical activity in alignment to cultural, political, and spiritual citizenship (Ali-Joseph, 2018). While sovereignty is typically referred to or connected with an inherent right to govern ourselves within our own land base, we are expanding the assertion of “exercising” sovereignty as a physical movement. Sport and physical activity have long provided a means for people to “exercise” sovereignty, both individually and collectively (Ali-Joseph, 2018). Sport is inherently tied to culture, and for Indigenous communities, physical movement, exercise, and sport have also been a protective factor in ensuring Indigenous leadership and futures. The relationship between Indigenous communities and sport within the education context is more complicated. Sport was a part of the process of dispossession of land and culture. At Carlisle Indian School and other boarding schools, sport and physical activity were intended to conform students. Along with spirituality, language, and other colonizing practices, sport was used as a subjugating force. Due to the inherent connection between mind, body, and movement for Indigenous individuals and communities, sport could provide “a context for the celebration of intertribal cooperation and identity” (Bloom, 2000, p. 37).

Like their SMI peers - HBCUs - TCUs and NASNTIs operate within similar institutional contexts hallmarked by smaller size, geographically diverse fan bases, and limited media representation despite meaningful local-to-national fandom (Blackwell, 2025; Gasman et al., 2008). While institutions like Haskell Indian Nations University and United Tribes Technical College have had successful athletic programs, they still suffer from a lack of widespread promotion and support outside of their communities and fanbases. Within a college sports landscape that emphasizes media visibility, larger institutional resources, and general fandom (e.g. KU basketball, Ohio State University football, and similar), TCUs and NASNTIs are

structurally disadvantaged relative to larger-platform institutions. This limits their ability to translate fan support into sustainable revenue generation models (Elliot & Kellison, 2019; NCAA, 2023; Snapp, 2022).

A Needed Shift in Understanding

Grounded in whiteness and the white gaze (Donnor, 2021), the U.S. higher education and college athletics landscape continues to marginalize TCUs and NASNTIs (along with other SMIs) through the actions of administrators, policy makers, and cultural gatekeepers. These actions benefit a large proportion of HPWIs through the allocation of resources, media narratives, and general market influence that continues the persistence of neoliberal monoculturalism in both higher education and college athletics (Alonso, 2025; Cooper & Hawkins, 2016; Foster et al., 2022; Hudson-Miles & Broadey, 2019; Newman, 2014). To combat the growing presence of neoliberal monoculturalism, a critical constructivist lens of organizational understanding is applied towards athletic spaces, their operations, and relationship to their adjoining educational institution – specifically at TCUs and NASNTIs (Bentley, 2003). Through this lens, we argue that while the field of college athletics is underpinned by neoliberal lenses that prioritize normative whiteness, economic gains, and industry similarity – the centrality of indigeneity within the athletics operations at TCUs and NASNTIs offers a different pathway to understanding. This pathway challenges the existing notions of competing logics or traditional approaches towards organizational hybridity – resulting in a more culturally grounded understanding of athletics operations within these institutions.

Method

Positionality Statement

The first author, who identifies as a Black man, grew up in the Midwestern region of the United States and experienced formal education of the Indigenous communities throughout his region. In conjunction with education during his formative years, the first author also attended two separate Special Mission Institutions (SMIs) - specifically a Historically Black College /University (HBCU) and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Being that his research centers on liberatory approaches to better understand and present SMIs in the broader body of sport management/organization scholarship, his central focus was to illuminate this institutional space that has been excluded from the broader body of knowledge.

The second author, who identifies as a Native woman, grew up in her Native community surrounded by other members of her tribe. She has always viewed sports as another cultural expression and opportunity for growth, both individually and collectively. She is also passionate about higher education and participated in her tribes' college financial aid assistance program. While she did not attend a TCU or NASNTI, she is familiar with the institutions through family and friends who have attended them. The second author constantly asked herself, 'whose interests are being served throughout this work?' As we answered that question, the second author sought to

situate herself as both a member of the research team and as a Cherokee, aiming to prioritize the Indigenous voices involved. The unique lenses and motivations of both scholars undergird the design and operation of this study by ensuring that 1) the appropriate communities are served and 2) the contribution to scholarship amplifies the collective body of TCUs and NASNTIs.

Being that the central goal of the study is to uncover and explain how indigeneity is integrated into organizational operations, the researchers implemented an inductive thematic analysis of participant responses to an online survey. As explained by Naeem and colleagues (2023), inductive thematic analyses assist in the development of conceptual frameworks contributing to the understanding of spaces and phenomena. The centering of indigeneity reflects Silva and colleagues' (2025) call for decolonial practices within organizational scholarship.

Research Design

This study was approved by the University of Kansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) and meets the necessary requirements for human subject-based research. The study is grounded in the qualitative tradition of centering voice, narrative, and perspective to develop a deeper understanding of space and condition. The research design is further developed and grounded within the critical constructivist lens (Bentley, 2003). Although primarily presented through pedagogical perspectives, critical constructivism (CritCon) challenges the roles of *reification* or presenting socially constructed knowledge as immovable and unchanging; *decontextualization* or stripping sociocultural context and nuances away from bodies of knowledge; and *technocratization* or the overreliance on applying knowledge into bureaucratic structures as opposed to seeing the full spectrum of science in action (Bentley, 2003).

Survey Instrument

Following informed consent, the participants completed a seven-item questionnaire that narrowed focus as they completed the questions. The first two items explored participant understandings of Special Mission Institutions (SMIs) and their awareness of their respective institutions being classified as such, respectively. The third and fourth items requested participants to discuss how their university and athletics department reflects the SMI status through programming, language, traditions, and similar actions. This high-level approach explores how these two institutions (the university and the athletics space) are either aligned or misaligned in their approaches towards reflecting culture and identity. This mirrors Schein's (1985) explanation of organizational culture consisting of assumptions, values, and artifacts where noting (mis)alignment is essential in further assessing athletics culture at these institutions. Continuing to narrow, the fifth and sixth questions requested that participants communicate how SMI status is reflected within their specific units/departments and their personal approach to their professional role. The seventh and final item was a reflection prompt that allowed for deeper insights into their responses and overall understanding of their institution.

Data Collection

We used Qualtrics software to create and disseminate surveys to athletics staff members at all classified TCUs and NASNTIs. Anonymous online surveys were used to give participants the freedom to communicate their perspectives without detection. Surveys were sent to all athletics staff members at National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) institutions that are designated as TCUs or NASNTIs via a database made available by the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions (MSI Directory, 2025). Self-selection was a key factor in the participant selection process due to the increased likelihood for participants to demonstrate (a) a noticeable interest in the topic, (b) willingness to contribute to the goals of the study, and (c) a higher likelihood of expertise/understanding of the topic (Khazaal et al. 2014).

The survey was delivered to 516 listed emails across the TCU/NASNTI athletics departments. Of those listed emails, 112 were undeliverable, 85 no longer worked at the institution or requested removal from the listserv, and 8 were removed due to incompleteness. As seen within Table 1, the study yielded 14 participants across eight TCU/NANSTI athletics departments - resulting in a 2.7% response rate and a 4.5% response rate when considering the aforementioned elements. The low response rate must be understood within a sociopolitical climate marked by increased tension for TCUs, NASNTIs, and other Special Mission Institutions (Alonso, 2025), which may have discouraged survey participation. These institutions encompass NCAA Division I, Division II, Division III, and NAIA institutions showing a wider range of athletic contexts.

From a practitioner perspective, the participants ranged from Directors of Athletics to Faculty Athletics Representatives to coaches across various sports. Roles include ADs, FARs, coaches, staff, and academic support personnel. As argued by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the diversity in participant profile allows the findings and language presented by the participants to extend beyond institutional or role contexts. The combination of institutional and role diversity assists in developing a framework to better understand and explore the integration of indigeneity within sport organizations.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step thematic analysis process to develop a conceptual framework (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022). *Selection of statements* required a unit-by-unit and line-by-line reviews of participant responses in alignment with the RQs. *Keywords* were highlighted to consistent words and phrases across responses and supported through memoing to emphasize salient participant language (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Naeem et al., 2023). *Coding* consisted of sorting keywords based on logic, operationalization, and structure of the survey to illuminate shared meanings. The *theme development* process grouped codes into categories that addressed the RQs (Naeem et al., 2023). *Conceptualization* emphasized

defining and operationalizing the developed themes, patterns, and relational processes (Arar, 2017; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Finally, *conceptual framework development* resulted in the design of a visual model that assists in better understanding the phenomena discovered within the data (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023).

TABLE 1.
Participant Details

Institution	Professional Area
Fort Lewis College	Administration & Leadership
Fort Lewis College	Coaching
Fort Lewis College	Coaching
Fort Lewis College	Coaching
Haskell Indian Nations University	Administration & Leadership
Montana State University-Northern	Coaching
Rogers State University	Academic
University of Alaska Fairbanks	Academic
University of Alaska Fairbanks	Coaching
University of Minnesota Morris	Health & Training
University of North Carolina at Pembroke	Academics
University of North Carolina at Pembroke	Administration & Leadership
University of North Carolina at Pembroke	Branding & Development
Utah State University	Support Services

Findings

Theme 1: Cultural Representation and Recognition

One of the more prominent themes that emerged in our review was the connection made between institutions and Indigenous cultures – notably the connection made between visual and symbolic representations. Native American mascots have historically been controversial, but in this sense, they were/are reminders of the institution’s association with the Indigenous community. Two of the institutions have straightforward Native American names, the Haskell Indians and the UNC-Pembroke (UNC-P) Braves. For these institutions, their imagery could hold a deeper, historical context that prompted administrators to reflect on their purpose. One participant (Haskell Indian Nations University) acknowledged the complexity, ‘Culture permeates throughout all aspects of the department from the admittedly dated team name and mascot to our game day experience, we always seek to emphasize cultural identity.’ In addition to Haskell and UNC-P, the University of Alaska Fairbanks athletics uses the name Nanook, a derivation of the Inupiaq word for polar bear.

Additionally, five of the eight institutions held special events to honor Native American heritage. Some of those were in conjunction with brands like Nike N7, Nike's initiative that celebrates Indigenous identity through sport, style, and self-expression (Nike, n.d.). Nike N7 games feature special, turquoise-colored uniforms for all athletes, honoring the brand and the importance of the color amongst Native communities. Turquoise is ceremonial and represents creation and hope (Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, n.d.). Beyond sports, these institutions also integrated ceremonies. One participant remarked, 'all formal ceremonies include representatives from the tribe in ceremonial dress and a flutist.' There was also a critique of certain ceremonies, which could be perceived as performative. Land acknowledgements have become commonplace at many institutions and public events, these formal statements highlight Indigenous communities' rights to territories seized by colonial powers (Veltman, 2023). One participant noted, 'We have land acknowledgements before every game, but I'm not sure it always goes beyond performance.' Others noted the need to add more substance to these token designations that do not implement a deeper cultural understanding. It was common to see more support for the opportunities that create space for integrating Native communities and actual tribal members.

Theme 2: Community Connection and Engagement

Sport and physical activity have been integral in Indigenous culture, as a leisure activity but also as a continuation of cultural expression (Oxendine, 1995). Native communities are and have been active participants in traditional sports like stickball but also modern sports like basketball. These communities are famously known for their passion and fandom, supporting their athletes, driving hours, and packing gyms. This passion can also be found at Tribal Colleges, as one participant (Haskell Indian Nations University) explained, "Haskell becomes a tight-knit community... it's not just a school—it's family." The unique blend of culture and passion for sports creates a deep sense of belonging that can permeate beyond a student's time on campus. The Haskell participant noted that many of their employees are alumni, longing to stay connected to the tight-knit community.

Another important element to the community engagement of these institutions is their inclusion of tribal communities. A Tribal Chairman stated that, "Collaborations between the Lumbee Tribe and UNC Pembroke play a crucial role in supporting our community and region with grant opportunities as well as student engagement and cultural enrichment." This quote was reinforced by other participants as well. One participant from UNC Pembroke stated the 'local tribe's culture is woven into all aspects of our campus'. So much that, 'you cannot separate our school from the Lumbee tribe'. Another participant from UNC Pembroke spoke about how all their institutional ceremonies include tribal leaders, including pre-game rituals. Institutions like Fort Lewis College also share their athletics with the community, facilitating bike and cycling workshops led by their student-athletes.

The interplay between institution and indigeneity assist in contributing to deeply-embedded relationships with the community members. These bonds enhance the

ability to recruit and maintain relationships with alumni. As one participant (UNC Pembroke) noted “we use our community outreach in recruiting. Perhaps more than other institutions, you see alumni return to serve as staff, longing to return to a space of belonging.” Building upon UNC-Pembroke, a participant from Rogers State University highlighted the integration of the local Cherokee Nation into their softball game experience; while Fort Lewis College has emphasized the communal nature of cycling as a space to bridge gaps across the Colorado Plateau region. Community connection and engagement is actively integrated across the athletics space - from in-game entertainment, donor networks, and establishing relationships across the region through sport.

Theme 3: Educational Opportunity and Structural Support

An essential component of higher education, even more so within Special Mission Institutions, is embedding the mission of the institution across a myriad of support structures and systems (Lane & Brown, II 2005). Understanding this point is essential in further unpacking the narratives of the participants, largely due to the history and context of TCUs and NASNTIs within the broader scope of US-based higher education (Stein, 2022). While support and educational opportunity are synonymous within the broader scope of higher education, especially SMIs like TCUs and NASNTIs, the athletics domain is often forgotten when discussing. The participants shift that narrative to highlight how their athletics spaces understand, promote, and integrate institutional mission into their practices.

To note, one participant (Fort Lewis College) highlighted their institutions’ Native American Tuition Waiver and celebrated the opportunity to ‘allow any tribal member to come to school at zero cost.’ The emphasis on bridging educational opportunity gaps, as supported by three other participants across different institutions, shows the explicit connection between the educational and athletics institutions of their respective campuses – leading to counter the existing narrative that higher education and athletics operate in separate silos (Stokowski et al., 2020). The interplay between athletics and the broader mission of their institution was further communicated by another participant (Haskell Indian Nations University), where they explained:

Like the university as a whole, athletics attempts to weave cultural experiences into our programs and operations. Some of our student athletes are not only the first in their families to attend college, but also may be the first of their families to live away from the communities in which they grew up. We understand the power of athletics to provide our athletes the opportunity to receive an education and to positively impact their lives, their families’ lives, and the lives of those in their communities.

The sentiments regarding the broader impact of athletics being a pathway to educational opportunity and community uplift were communicated across the participants. A common misconception is that all Native American students receive higher education funding from the government, this is simply not the case. The opportunity to obtain athletic scholarships can offset the prohibitive cost of college. The exemplary

statement provides deeper detail into how these athletics spaces are framed around a broader understanding of the institution, which further communicates how TCU/NASNTI (indigeneity) status is embedded within athletics operations. Building upon educational opportunity, the connection between the sporting space and the university is further reflected in the educational experience. To note, a participant from (UNC-Pembroke) communicated:

I teach a class called Recreation and Sport in Indigenous Cultures. My goal for students in the class (many of which are SAs) is to see how what we call “sport and recreation” is a spiritual practice in many tribes, whether Stickball with the Cherokees and Haudenosaunee, or running for the Hopi. Sport can actually serve to connect to the Creator.

Tapping directly into the classroom space to signify the role of sport within the broader Indigenous community reflects a deeper level of intentionality within the athletics department. The broader scope of these athletics spaces being integrated within academic realms reiterates the connection between the two institutions, while also setting the foundation for indigeneity reflection in other areas.

Extending beyond the scope of educational opportunities, the participants also illustrated multiple forms of structural support enacted by their athletics departments. In particular, the participants stressed a consistent culture of providing support and a thorough understanding of their students’ needs. A participant (Fort Lewis College) noted the dual approach applied when serving their college athletes by providing resources for both seamless athletic and academic transitions. Along with support for seamless transitions, participants (Utah State University) noted the strong relationship between athletics and the counseling center, a departmental culture centered on inclusivity, and full-time professionals whose primary focus is ensuring inclusive practices. In fact, they mentioned, ‘USU does a great job of being intentional with programing and culturally sensitive practices. For example, the routines/schedules of practices consider the unique needs of each [tribal] population.’ For example, students may need to follow special routines due to their tribal traditions, such as dietary restrictions or the need to forego practice to attend special ceremonies. This is particularly impactful given the presence of time constraints and conformity within Division I college sport where athletes are expected to forego non-sport elements to maintain uniformity and dedication to the team (Adams et al.,2024). The combination of educational opportunity and structural support displays a unique culture where athletics operates as a true component of the institution as opposed to being an adjacent element of the university.

Theme 4: Personal and Historical Identity Integration

Perhaps the most prominent of the themes is *Personal and Historical Identity Integration*. Although we are not quantifying the data, it is important to note that of the 14 participants, only one could not attest to knowing that their institution was a SMI, and more specifically, a TCU or NASNTI. The understanding of SMI designation was essential in communicating an awareness of the overall campus culture and community. An inherent element of this theme is the participants’ connection to the Indigenous community. As communicated by a participant from UNC-Pembroke:

As a Native American woman who graduated from this diverse university while being a former student-athlete, I am honored that members from my tribe created this university to help individuals like me. I give honor to my heritage and when I describe UNCP athletics to others, I mention how athletics has helped grow our institution from what it was once to what it is now.

Identity of self is paramount and often leads to a greater connection and commitment to the institution when there is identity alignment, with particular attention to race and ethnicity (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). Interestingly, misalignment along racial and ethnic lines did not create a schism or gap. In fact, multiple non-Indigenous participants communicated that the culture and history of the institution shaped their approaches towards their role, often represented through continued education, community embeddedness, and culturally-responsive practices. A practitioner at Utah State University stated:

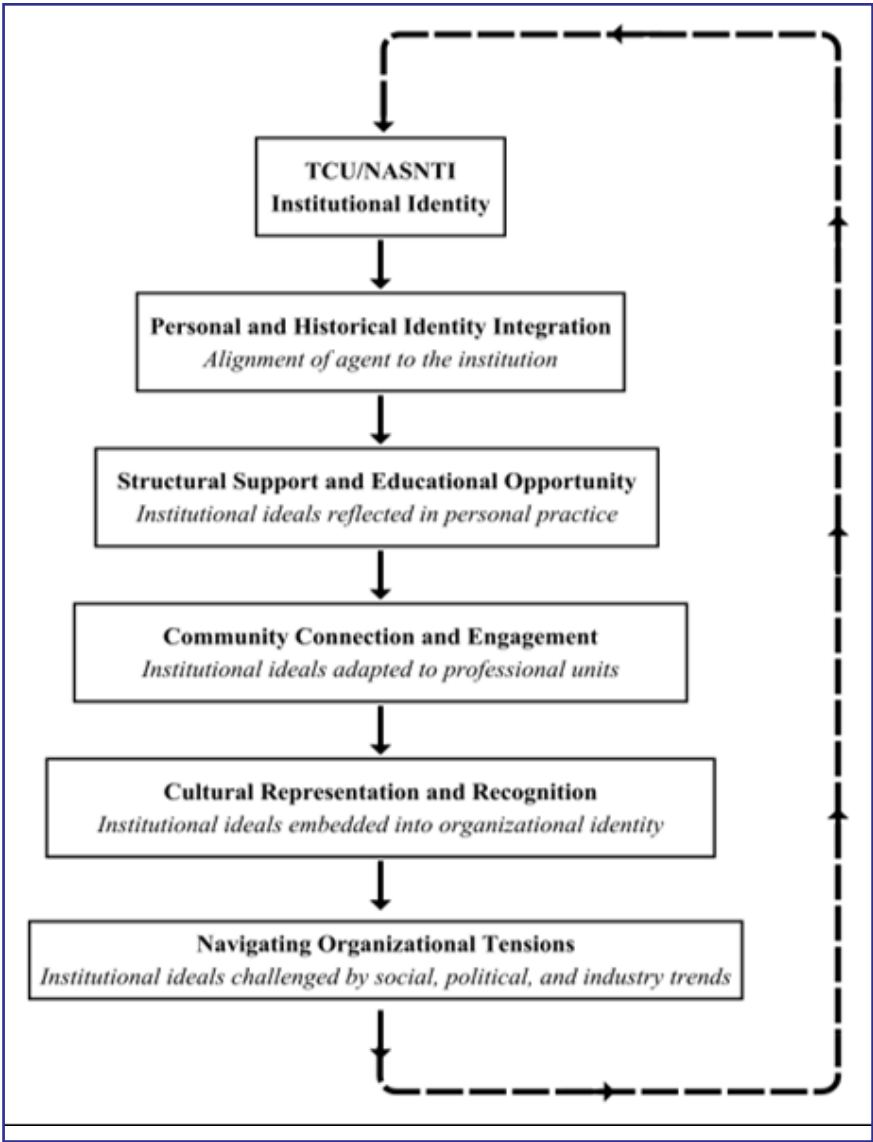
Cultural humility and competence are absolutely at the forefront of my work. I recognize that each of my clients and team all have unique micro-cultures within the culture of the entire athletic department. It is imperative to ensure quality care to each population I serve.

Culturally responsive practice also exists in the awareness and addressing injustice, two elements not consistently seen within college sport (Kluch, 2023). Participants at Fort Lewis College highlighted the institution's efforts in addressing the injustices committed while FLC operated as a boarding school. Another participant at Utah State mentioned that while anti-DEI legislation presented limitations to the practices and language used on campus, there was still an emphasis on overcoming those challenges and remaining true to the TCU/NASNTI designation. This awareness of self and history is foundational in shaping the operation and culture of these athletics spaces – further asserting that the relationship between sport, university, and indigeneity is robust and tightly interwoven.

Theme 5: Navigating Organizational Tensions

An interesting component within the data is the presence of noteworthy tensions, primarily with the role of dominant (and hegemonic) ideologies impacting the operation of these spaces. To note, a participant at a public institution noted the recent passing of anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) legislation that placed limitations on programming, discourse, and other campus activities. Similarly, another participant at a public institution noted the overwhelming presence of Christianity within their department, which limited the presence and integration of Indigenous spirituality within their programming and practices. These challenges reflect the shortcomings of leaning towards organizational hybridity and cultural reproduction – with emphasis on the presence and maintenance of dominant ideologies (Bourdieu, 1986). The combination of anti-DEI legislation and normative Christian values both center a predominant logic of anti-Indigenous sentiments (Mackay & Feagin, 2022). Although only present across two institutions, the continued challenges faced by TCUs and NASNTIs will present a unique positioning for the future operation of these athletics spaces.

Figure 1
The Embedded Indigeneity Framework



Discussion

Introducing the Embedded Indigeneity Framework

The EIF directly counters the assumed macro-to-micro process the researchers expected from the participants. In detail, the assumption when designing the study was that the overall identity of the institution would have a trickle-down effect into the athletics space, largely due to the status of most TCUs and NASNTIs being smaller institutions (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Conversely, the TCU and NASNTI status was communicated to have a direct impact on the personnel within the athletics departments who then integrated that understanding of institutional identity across athletics. Even further, the linear-circular design of the EIF reflects the consistently evolving nature of the TCU/NASNTI context and illustrates the necessity for change and development as a method for persistence.

As seen within the EIF, the core component is the *Personal and Historical Identity Integration* which reflects a foundational understanding of the institutional context - or being aware that while they are athletics professionals, they are athletics professionals **at** TCUs and NASNTIs. While this macro-level understanding of the institution is communicated, the participants explicitly communicated a deep level understanding of their institutional context and importance to integrate that understanding into their operations as sport professionals. This essential understanding shapes the way professionals show up in their respective roles, which further impacts the operation of their units and the broader organizational space. The foundation and operationalization of the EIF reflects the *micro-foundations of institutional theory* or the process where organizational actors are impacted by overarching institutional forces like values, norms, and beliefs – which are then implemented into their practices and ultimately impacting the operation of the organization (Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

The impact of the *Personal and Historical Identity Integration* then transitions from the individual agent to a common and shared understanding of *Structural Support and Educational Opportunity* despite the communicated responsibilities within their athletics roles. The consistency of each participant communicating an understanding and desire to promote structural support and educational opportunities for athletes reflects early integration of TCU/NASNTI identity into the athletics. Building upon this shared understanding of support and educational opportunity beyond formal role requirements, a deeper unit and organizational culture emerged, centered on *Engagement and Community Connection*. This is seen through the integration of community members with in-game entertainment, community service programming, early college access programming through sport, and expanding the understanding of sport through classroom curriculum. Akin to Smalls and colleagues (2007), these elements promote a sense of shared racial identity and serves as a promotive factor - which positively impacts access, matriculation, and completion. *Cultural Representation and Recognition* reflects the overarching operation of the athletics space as an arena for institutional identity reflection. As communicated by the participants,

their respective athletics departments each reflected the institutional identity and the broader scope of indigeneity. This institutional embeddedness and identity reflection is operationalized through logos, branding, sporting traditions, and engagement with Indigenous-serving initiatives. Given the visibility and communal nature of inter-collegiate sport, the athletics department serves as a front-facing space to amplify institutional mission and identity through a unique, sport-centric lens.

As noted by Alonso (2025), MSIs like TCUs and NASNTIs are facing increasing pressures and norms that impact campuses and their adjoining athletics spaces. The final theme, *Navigating Organizational Tensions*, serves as a final filter that continuously shapes the EIF process. As policy, practice, and social norms shift - the framework displays how indigeneity evolves and persists across organizational life. A key example of this evolution is that despite challenges faced by public institutions (Utah State University and UNC-Pembroke), participants communicated that organizational goals and culture remained aligned to the TCU/NASNTI identity of the institution through shifts in language and external presentation.

Resistance, Innovation, and Cultural Praxis in Practice

Centering indigenous identity and the processes in which this identity is embedded and operationalized in organizations is paramount in crafting a larger counternarrative and understanding of athletics spaces outside of the typical HWPI/Power conference lens. Counternarrative, as explained by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), amplifies and centers voices of those who are often excluded or forgotten in larger discourse. Emphasizing the alignment between individual agents and the institutional identity is essential in illustrating the communicated impact of special mission institutions – in both the university and athletics domains. The development of mentoring programs, intensive community engagement initiatives, and establishing a deeper understanding of athletics in relation to the Indigenous community reflects both innovation and resistance. While the commercialized nature of college athletics cannot be fully removed, the ethos of these spaces is still grounded within sovereignty, self-determination, and collective uplift (Belarde-Lewis & Kostecky, 2021).

Implications

Sociocultural Implications

In alignment with the researchers' decolonial and social justice lenses, this study first serves as a disruption to deficit-based narratives surrounding TCUs and NASNTIs in sport. As explained by Gasman and colleagues (2008), these institutions are severely under-resourced and structurally restrained and face extreme constraints despite their history, tradition, and outcomes to their student communities. Aligning with the broader body of sport organization scholarship, the market-driven logics of the field often leave smaller institutional types understudied or positioned against HPWIs (Historically and Predominantly White Institutions) (Foster et al., 2022; Newman 2014). Illuminating the unique culture and approach implemented by TCUs and NASNTIs explains how the broader concepts of indigeneity are oper-

ationalized through a sporting context and serve to continue the mission of the institution. Even further, the development from this study presents an alternative outlook into Indigenous-based sport organizations, where an agent-to-organization process amplifies the mission of the institution. This stark contrast from traditionalist institutionalization discourse within sport organizations further asserts that decolonial praxis expands the scope of understanding and application.

Theoretical Implications

The selected methodology was implemented due to the end results that 1) presented a novel conceptual framework and 2) serves as a contextually specific extension of existing theory/theories (Naeem et al., 2023). When reviewing the EIF, the primary development is a unique adaptation to college athletics research that has continuously positioned the educational and athletics institutions as inherently separate due to their competing logics (Buer, 2009; Sperber, 2001). The micro-foundations of institutionalization support the agent-to-organization process of embedding institutional logics within an organizational space through developing a personal alignment, then operationalizing that alignment in their roles, units, and then across the organization. Indigeneity, which is the culturally-embedded logic, provides the necessary nuance and understanding of how Indigenous-based organizations engage in culturally-reflective praxis. The EIF and support from the aligning frameworks further communicate that athletics at TCUs and NASNTIs are not separate, competing, or hybridized – but operate as intertwined entities working to continue the mission of their institutional identifier.

Practical Implications

From an organizational operations perspective, the developments from this study expand the understanding of organizational identity, indigeneity, and practice. To note, the EIF provides an alternative approach for understanding how institutional values are embedded across levels of the organization. While organizational hybridity can explain how competing spaces like TCU/NASNTI institutions and college athletics can coexist in a hybrid organization model, the development of the EIF reflects a clear alignment to the internal institutional field (Delmestri & Brumana, 2017). The internal institutional field posits that while different components of the same organization can vary by guiding logics (athletics vs academics), the overarching institutional logic (indigeneity) guides the operations of both areas. When reviewing the narratives of the practitioners and the design of the EIF, the foundational role of connecting oneself with the broader identity of being a TCU/NASNTI is integral. This micro-to-macro process within the EIF reflects the impactful role of the individual agent in sustaining and altering their organizational fields (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). The unique combination of internal institutional fields and the micro-foundations of institutionalization further supports the argument that the underpinning logic of indigeneity creates an interaction between the educational and sporting spaces that is not commonly seen or discussed within the broader body of sport organization scholarship.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

The scope of Special Mission Institutions continues to expand as more educational institutions reflect specific values and operations unique to their histories, locations, and communities (Lane & Brown, 2005). Future research should continue to reflect the appropriate nuance and cultural understanding to address and counter dominant and hegemonic ideologies. With attention to the CritCon tradition (Bentley, 2003), organizational research should actively challenge the reification and decontextualization processes often exhibited within research. Knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by socially-embedded power structures, however, as seen within the TribalCrit tradition, shifting focus and centering voice/narrative is necessary to understanding how communities adapt and operate within their context (Brayboy, 2005). Even further, the decontextualization process continues to perpetuate hegemonic structures as normative and acceptable, e.g. whiteness and Christo-nationalism.

Being that the primary limitation of the study is the small population of TCUs and NASNTIs, which contributed to a smaller participant pool, future scholarship should engage in methods that result in larger participant pools. Additionally, insights from athlete and student experiences are necessary in expanding the body of knowledge surrounding athletics at TCUs and NASNTIs. Even further, as with any framework, the EIF would benefit from tests and replications to further develop and expand the framework to include a wider range of perspective and insight, namely college athletes. The college athlete perspective can provide much-needed insights into athletic development, educational and professional development, and the broader social implications of matriculating through an athletics space that is grounded in indigeneity. Similar research should shift the institutional context to better understand how HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), HSIs (Hispanic Serving Institutions), WCU (Women's Colleges and Universities), Rural/Urban Serving Institutions, and many more integrate institutional identity into their athletics spaces and how athletics works to amplify the mission of the institution.

Conclusion

The researchers sought to understand how indigeneity is embedded within the athletics departments within TCUs and NASNTIs. Extending beyond gauging embeddedness, the study also explored how these athletic spaces continue and amplify the missions of their adjoining educational institutions. The findings and subsequent analysis present a well-integrated space that artfully blends the Indigenous tradition and sport. Although understanding that identity is integrated into sport and amplified through the operations of the athletics space, the EIF provided a culturally grounded extension of two underutilized concepts within organizational research: internal organizational fields and micro-foundations of institutionalization. By understanding how the guiding logic of indigeneity is grounded through personnel and passed through the organization in a bottom-up manner, we see how tribal philosophies are operationalized.

As stated by our participant, ‘you cannot separate our school from the Lumbee tribe.’ The researchers would like to extend this message and argue that you cannot separate any participating institutions from their TCU and NASNTI identity/identities. As seen within the narratives, indigeneity is the driving force in both the academics and athletics spaces. With attention to their athletics spaces, the role of the individual agent is powerful due to their personal connection and understanding of TCU/NASNTI status. This understanding shapes their personal approach to practice, which holds considerable implications for their respective units. As indigeneity embeddedness extends beyond the agent and their unit, the athletics department experiences a deeper alignment to the TCU/NASNTI identity. While prevailing literature often frames intercollegiate athletics departments as separate, predominantly commercially-driven, and hierarchical – this study challenges those notions. The agent is impactful, community engagement is paramount, and athletics seeks to embody indigeneity within operations. In fact, one could argue that athletics departments at TCUs and NASNTIs actively reject dominant narratives surrounding college sport by reshaping them through culturally grounded and community-aligned practice. In sum, indigeneity must be viewed as central to the athletics mission, not a symbolic add-on.

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