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# ‘To honor and glorify God’: the role of religion in one intercollegiate athletics culture

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Numerous events have provided evidence that the cultural values and assumptions of intercollegiate athletic departments are often incongruent with those of their host institutions. This discrepancy has even been evident in Christian institutions which seek to integrate faith into the learning experience. Using the organizational culture perspective, this study sought to determine how religion influenced the culture of one intercollegiate athletics department. The study took place at a highly selective evangelical Christian college with a nationally competitive athletic department. Data were collected through interviews with 19 campus leaders, observation of cultural events and document analysis. Analysis occurred qualitatively through a process of theorizing. The results indicate that evangelical Christianity played a significant role in the athletic department’s culture by constraining its membership, influencing its pedagogy and guiding department decisions. As a result, its values and assumptions were consistent with those of the overall campus culture. The reasons underlying this cultural integration offer coaches and administrators of all institutional affiliations the possibility that the organizational culture perspective can be used to create athletic programs that are more consistent with institutional values.

**Keywords:** *Athletics; Religion; Organizational culture; College*

## Introduction

Over the past five years incidents at several colleges and universities have provided evidence for a growing gap between academic values and those of intercollegiate athletic departments (Zimbalist, 1999; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Suggs, 2003; Wolfe, 2003). Perhaps the most obvious example of this divergence occurred at Baylor University. In 2003 one of the university’s basketball players was murdered and his team-mate was accused of the crime. The team’s head coach attempted to disguise the incident by misrepresenting the victim, but was caught lying and subsequently resigned. Baylor is not the only university that has been embarrassed by its intercollegiate athletic department, but this incident is especially noteworthy

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because it occurred at one of the USA's most prominent protestant Christian institutions. Christian colleges and universities as a whole maintain a different and more pointed mission within higher education (Migliazzo, 2002; Wolfe, 2003). Christian institutions seek 'the integration of Christian faith with the living and learning experiences' (Christian College Consortium, 1999) and to 'transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth' (Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2004). To accomplish these objectives, Christian faculty permeate their curriculums with Christian values, examine knowledge with a Christian world view and provide students with role models of faith (Migliazzo, 2002). As a result of this discipleship, students learn that faith can inform all aspects of life, including athletics.

Intercollegiate athletics have long served a role in Christian colleges and universities (Chu, 1989; Rudolph, 1990; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). Religious institutions have used sport to attract prospective students, to garner alumni support and as a marketing tool. Intercollegiate athletic teams have also helped Christian colleges legitimize themselves in the secular world of higher education by providing, ironically, a degree of academic respectability (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). Furthermore, Ladd and Mathisen (1999) believe that Christian college coaches, like Christian faculty, are more focused on teaching moral development through sports than their secular peers. However, the examples at Baylor and other similarly marred religious institutions cloud the current role of religion in Christian college athletic departments (Wolfe, 2003). As a result, this study attempted to clarify the role of religion in athletics by examining the organizational culture of one Christian college athletic department.

### *The organizational culture perspective*

While there are many lenses through which organizational life can be viewed (i.e. structural or political) (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Morgan, 1997), the organizational culture perspective provides the best access to the symbolic and interpretive elements of organizations (Morgan, 1997). Because religion is a highly subjective topic, the organizational culture perspective was used to examine the role of Christianity in one athletic department. This perspective gained prominence in the early 1980s as a way to explain the link between societal cultures and organizational effectiveness (Morgan, 1997). Although it has become a popular means of assessing organizations, 'like so many concepts, organizational culture is not defined the same way by any two popular theorists' (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1993, p. 675).

However, many organizational theorists acknowledge Schein's (1992) conception of organizational culture as the pattern of shared assumptions that guide behavior in organizations (Ott, 1989; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1993; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Slack, 1997). The perspective, as primarily articulated by Schein, assumes that organizations are ambiguous and unpredictable entities that exist in open environments (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Bolman & Deal, 1997). This uncertainty

leads organizations and their members to develop ideologies and assumptions to create cognitive stability (Schein, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Bolman & Deal, 1997). These ideologies and assumptions are subconsciously accepted and ultimately enable organizational cultures to guide organizational behavior. Ideologies and assumptions organize themselves into patterns that Schein (1992) referred to as 'mental maps' (p. 22). These maps 'define . . . what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various situations' (p. 22). However, because organizations exist in open environments, these mental maps are subject to change. Thus, the final assumption of the organizational perspective is that organizational cultures are dynamic.

According to Schein (1992), organizational cultures are comprised of three levels: artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions. Artifacts are the most evident component of culture, which one can see, hear or feel. Common artifacts include language, behaviors, rituals, ceremonies, rules, slogans and documents. Although artifacts are easy to perceive, the underlying meanings are not always clear and thus artifacts offer an incomplete picture of organizational culture. Espoused values refer to the 'norms that provide the day-to-day operating principles by which members of the group guide their behavior' (Schein, 1992, p. 18). Ott (1989) had stated that espoused values state what the organization wants and provide an indication of the importance of those desires. Espoused values and artifacts often coincide, but may still inaccurately describe organizational culture. It is not uncommon for an organization to act in complete contrast to its stated beliefs and values (Schein, 1992; Rollins & Roberts, 1998). To best access organizational culture, basic assumptions must be uncovered. Basic assumptions are the true premise for organizational behavior, as they provide a subconscious, almost thoughtless, guide for members to react to the environment (Ott, 1989). Ultimately, the basic assumptions provide members of an organizational culture with the mental maps that guide their perceptions and feelings within the culture (Schein, 1992).

The organizational culture perspective provides a holistic view of organizations (Ott, 1989), acknowledges the role of the environment (Morgan, 1997; Oden, 1997) and has been linked to organizational effectiveness (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Oden, 1997; Rollins & Roberts, 1998). As a result, the perspective has been a common way to examine businesses (Rollins & Roberts, 1998) and educational institutions (Wolfe & Strange, 2003). Recently, the concept of organizational culture has emerged as a buzzword for leaders looking to cure the ills of intercollegiate athletics (Brand, 2001; Dempsey, 2001; Sperber, 2004). However, little research has studied the link between culture and athletic departments. In fact, Beyer and Hannah (2000) have suggested that 'a central challenge for those who would reform collegiate athletics is to recognize and deal with these cultural characteristics' (p. 127).

Therefore, this study sought to examine the role of religion in the athletic culture of one Christian liberal arts college. Using the organizational culture perspective, this paper sought to answer three research questions. First, what is the organizational

culture of the athletic department? Second, what indications of religion or faith emerge within the athletic department? Third, what function do religious actions serve in the athletic department's organizational culture?

## **Methods**

Organizational culture is not easily revealed (Ott, 1989; Schein, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Therefore qualitative methods, and specifically the case study approach, were used for this study. Case studies provide access to subjective aspects of a setting and a variety of data. This method is also useful for answering 'how' and 'why' questions (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). In addition, case studies have been used to investigate several aspects of higher education (Wolfe & Strange, 2003; Tsui, 2000) and intercollegiate athletics (Adler & Adler, 1985; Meyer, 1990; Schroeder, 2000).

### *Setting*

This study took place at Pacific Christian College (PCC), a pseudonym for a private, evangelical Christian, liberal arts institution on the west coast (all other institutions and nicknames were also assigned pseudonyms). The college was founded in 1937 and moved to its current location in the forested, residential foothills of a wealthy, medium sized city in 1945. For most of its history PCC was a nondescript small college known primarily in the Christian world of higher education. Over the past 25 years PCC has increasingly incorporated academic rigor into its institutional culture. As a result, PCC was recently recognized by several publications for academic strength and has gained membership to a few prestigious higher education consortiums.

Academically the college focused on integrating a Christian perspective with the liberal arts. Its renewed academic commitment was reflected through an enlarged faculty, curriculum revisions and increased admissions standards. Religiously the college was non-denominational, but it required all 90 faculty members to sign a statement of Christian faith. An overwhelming majority of its 1,200 students identified themselves as Christians, although Christianity was not a prerequisite for admission. However, students were required to attend chapel three times per week and adhere to several 'community standards' which restrict student behavior.

Stemming from several factors, the college was plagued by financial struggles and had a meager \$18 million endowment. Because it was non-denominational, PCC received no church-related funding. Its youth and small size limited PCC's alumni support. In addition, the county government placed an enrollment cap on the college that prevented PCC from increasing its size to meet financial goals. Instead, PCC was a tuition-driven institution regularly raising fees at rates above the national norms. As a result, PCC was one of the most expensive colleges in the country.

*Participant selection and data collection*

Participant selection followed a snowball sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The athletic director at PCC was initially contacted and interviewed, and he facilitated interviews with other campus leaders, who then facilitated further meetings. A total of 19 campus leaders were interviewed. The president and past president provided broad leadership perspectives of the college. Information concerning the academic life of PCC was garnered from the provost, admissions director, athletic-admissions liaison, a department chair and two informal faculty leaders. The athletic director, the sports information director and all but two full-time coaches provided the athletic perspective for the study. Four student athletes offered their views of both the academic and athletic facets of the college.

Data was collected over a 1 year period from spring 2002 to spring 2003 for a broad study examining the culture of the institution. A majority of the data came from semi-structured interviews with participants. Recorded interviews lasted from 35 minutes (student athlete) to 2 hours (athletic-admissions liaison). In general, the interviews attempted to ascertain the culture of the college, the culture of the athletic department and the relationship between the two cultures. The interviews were transcribed and notes and diagrams taken from the interviews were incorporated. After the interviews follow-up electronic communication took place with four participants. The provost was also interviewed a second time for 45 minutes.

Observations of numerous games, practices, meetings and ceremonies were conducted to further clarify the relationship between the athletic and institutional cultures within PCC. At each event field notes were recorded for further analysis. Throughout the study documents related to the research questions were also collected (e.g. admission brochures and programs). To gain historical information on the college, books and articles were examined. Current cultural information was gleaned from community newspaper articles, student newspaper articles, media guides and the PCC web site. Copies of relevant information were made and kept for analysis.

*Data analysis techniques*

The primary means of data analysis was 'theorizing', which features four phases, perception, categorization, establishing linkages and speculation, that enable researchers to build a hypothesis about the phenomena under investigation (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). In perception, transcripts, field notes and documents were surveyed for potentially important bits of information, or 'units of analysis' (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 168). The units of analysis were then grouped into categories based on similarities and differences. Those categories were broken down into subcategories in a second phase of categorization. Links and relationships between the categories and were established through written memos. In the final phase, speculation, the literature is used as a foundation to develop conclusions about new constructs and to interpret links and relationships.

To best understand and interpret the data, it is necessary to establish my experiences and biases, since the researcher is the primary tool of investigation in qualitative studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I have significant experience in higher education and intercollegiate athletics. As an undergraduate I was a student athlete at a highly selective public college and worked in its athletic department. In addition, I spent 3 years as an instructor at a small, public, liberal arts institution. During that period my wife was the coach of a varsity team, so I maintained an intimate knowledge of the operations within the athletic department. I am currently in the fourth year of employment at a large public university, where my wife is also a head coach.

Several steps were taken to account for any resulting biases and to meet the quality control standards of naturalistic, qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Triangulation of multiple forms of data was used to ensure credibility (Merriam, 1998). To establish transferability, 'rich, thick description' (Merriam, 1998, p. 211) was provided, as was the social context for data collection. An extensive audit trail was kept to promote confirmability. Dependability was provided by my dissertation advisor, who served as an adversary challenging the emerging categories and themes.

## **Results**

The results indicated that religion had important roles in the organizational culture of PCC's athletic department. As a result of these roles, the athletic department maintained values and assumptions that were consistent with the overall institutional culture. In accordance with the organizational culture perspective, this section will first explain the artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions of PCC's athletic culture. Throughout the explanation of cultural levels, religious actions will be highlighted. The section will conclude by establishing the roles of faith in PCC's athletic department.

### *Artifacts*

On the surface, PCC's athletic culture seemed similar to secular institutions. Since its inception the college has had a strong athletic department and in the past decade was recognized by the National Association of College Directors of Athletics as one of the top members of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). PCC's Mariner teams competed in 12 sports and have won multiple national, district and conference championships. Individually, over 50 of its athletes have been all-Americans. Furthermore, several of its coaches are members of various halls of fame. The assistant admissions director humbly summarized, 'Pacific Christian has had a long tradition of being a premier NAIA school'.

This success was celebrated with numerous artifacts and ceremonies. The foyer of the gym was a monument to Mariner athletic accomplishments. Plaques with the pictures, years and sport of every all-American literally draped a sidewall. The opposite side displayed PCC's official hall of fame, where coaches, athletes and administrators were honored. The wall greeting visitors was full of plaques honoring

the national accomplishments of each team. The fourth wall was hidden by a large glass case holding conference, district and national championship trophies. The interior of the gym was also a celebration of team success. The north and south walls (those without bleachers) were covered in massive felt banners commemorating national champions, national qualifying teams, district championships and conference championships. Each time a banner was unveiled it occurred at half-time of a men's basketball game to ensure a large crowd and a public ceremony. Other ceremonies were more extravagant. Every team hosted a formal banquet and boosters sponsored a year-end banquet honoring the top athletes and scholar athletes at a stylish local resort.

Adding to the athletic culture was an intangible sense of tradition. There was a sense of pride among the athletes that wearing the Mariner uniform was special and that 'there is something different about us'. When competing it was important for athletes to 'try to represent the quality and tradition of Pacific Christian'. The athletic culture's artifacts were most evident against its rivals. In particular, PCC maintained bitter rivalries with two other Christian schools that, regardless of the sport, aroused feelings of antagonism. When those sports were men's basketball or men's and women's soccer there was a palpable buzz campus wide. The campus newspaper had extensive coverage leading up to the games. Tickets were sold out in advance and, in one instance, observers had to purchase tickets from enterprising students. Even faculty members acknowledged the rivalries. A women's basketball player claimed 'most of my teachers will be like, "Oh, I hate Nazarene. Go win tonight"'. Students and fans furthered the tradition as well. For important soccer games it was common to see eight male students with their torsos painted in school colors, each with a letter spelling out Mariners. The athletic-admissions liaison also noted that students carry 'couches all the way down to the soccer field and put them on the sidelines . . . and bring them all the way back every game to show support'. At men's basketball games the coach's mom is locally renowned for criticizing the referees and is a celebrated figure among the students. The students add support by banging drums, chanting and making shirts that degrade the opponents, but most of these actions are done in a relatively conservative manner (e.g. shouting 'bad call' instead of 'bullshit').

In summary, all of these elements, the success, the trophies and the fans, combined to create a level of culture that was a very visible and valuable part of the Mariner athletic culture. The men's basketball coach summarized:

I think our athletes would say its been wonderful being part of this tradition. And the tradition is not simply athletics . . . not just Pacific Christian College athletics inside the arena. [Pauses] I had a player in here the other day and he said, 'I really miss the tradition' . . . . What he meant by tradition was more than just the wins and losses and wearing the uniform, but it was how that all fits together.

### *Espoused values*

On a deeper cultural level the athletic department espoused four key values via a mission statement. The statement was clearly displayed in a large frame high on



the wall above a smattering of trophies in its office complex. It expressed the following:

1. to honor Jesus Christ in all that we do;
2. to support and enhance the mission of Pacific Christian College;
3. to provide the opportunity for a life changing experience;
4. to compete to the highest level of our capability.

Many coaches acknowledged and referred to the mission, noting that it was a foundation for actions and decisions within the athletic department. A comment from the women's assistant basketball coach was illustrative:

I feel like when his decisions are made, the mission is part of what we decide. And it gives us kind of a common ground to stand on to make a decision . . . . We, they are changing the way they do athletic budgets . . . . We had a meeting about that at our athletic staff retreat last fall and it caused some major concerns. You know what are we going to do, especially this first year? It's already started. But the plan of attack wasn't [complaining], you know it was like let's adhere to our mission in finding hundreds of thousands of dollars. It was the first thing we talked about. It was like this pre-eminent thing, having us accomplish our mission. You know we can accomplish our mission with all walk-ons. OK now we know that, let's keep that in perspective.

However, further investigation revealed that not all elements of the mission were the basis of action, nor were all its elements equally important. Specifically, honoring Jesus Christ and providing a life-changing experience were clearly the most important components of the mission statement. Although professing to support the college's liberal arts mission, the athletic department had little means to support, and in some cases fought, the institution's strong academic assumptions. The fourth part of the department's mission was acted upon, but such actions were ultimately driven by a basic assumption.

### *Basic assumptions*

Three basic assumptions guided actions and decisions within PCC's athletic culture. First, there was an assumed link between Christian faith and athletic ability. Second, sport was viewed as 'a laboratory' where athletes could learn to grapple with Christian values in a relatively low risk environment. Third, winning was seen as the pre-eminent goal of intercollegiate athletics. As with any organizational culture, all three assumptions overlapped in guiding actions and decisions within PCC's athletic culture.

The foundational assumption of the athletic culture at PCC was the existence of a divine relationship between faith and athletic abilities. This assumption was exemplified in a comment by the former president:

Well, it umm, in ways that I probably don't fully understand, in our American society there's a lot of athletes who are Christian. Professional athletes and college athletes and coaches and they are outspoken about it. And so there has got to be

some kind of connection that goes even beyond my understanding. Kind of a natural affinity when you are in a highly visible, competitive sport, faith clearly can make a difference.

In most cases this spiritual link was manifested in a belief that athletic ability was a divine blessing. Virtually every award winner at an annual banquet sprinkled their acceptance speech with an acknowledgment of God ‘blessing me with athletic talent’ or ‘allowing God’s will to come through [their] athletic talent’. Coaches were also instrumental in perpetuating this assumption by operating programs where ‘the number one thing is [the athletes’] relationship with God’ or seeing sport as ‘a vehicle for . . . helping people become more fully who they are in the eyes of God’.

Because talent was viewed divinely, athletes and coaches felt that, as a matter of faith, they had to honor God through the sport experience. This glorification took several forms. Prayer was a centerpiece for most teams. Teams opened practice with prayer, closed practice with prayer, prayed together before games, after the games, with other teams, with their coaches and with each other. Coaches and athletes were regularly observed actively praying and singing in chapel. Teams that traveled extensively held Bible studies together and attended church on the road, while other teams held spiritual retreats. Some coaches even included religion in their game plans. A basketball player explained:

The last key to the game is always to honor and glorify God. Always. And so we go through the whole game plan, and we’re pumped up, and the last thing coach says is, ‘Let’s go out there and honor and glorify God’.

Coaches were also purposeful about role modeling Christian qualities and leading complete lives. Instead of spending the majority of their time fretting over a sport, coaches tried to remain committed teachers, family members and church members. In fact, the men’s basketball coach claimed his greatest compliment was when one of his former players said he was ‘balanced . . . in regards to my family, my values, and my faith being more important than just winning and losing basketball games’. Athletes also felt a sense of caring from their coaches. A women’s basketball player noted that her coach, with whom the team ‘had kind of a dispute with his coaching style’, still modeled Christian behavior.

He’ll, like, invite us to his house for dinner. If we need a ride to the airport at six in the morning he is there . . . He loves us as kids. He would do anything for us. So I think it extends to more than basketball because of the Christianity.

Coaches were even willing to make decisions consistent with Christian values despite possible negative consequences. Prospective student athletes were highly scrutinized for their compatibility with the institution’s values. One coach retracted an offer to a recruit because ‘I just didn’t like the way he treated his dad’. The basketball coach changed his offense partly to improve the sense of sharing amongst his team. The track coach dismissed an all-American runner because he was not conducting himself in a Christian manner. He explained:

I had to tell him one time; ‘You can’t run fast enough to make me like you. It’s not about how fast you run. It’s about who you are’, and I had a hard time respecting him because he was refusing to become an honorable, responsible individual.

Such comments reflected the second assumption of PCC’s athletic culture. Intercollegiate athletics were assumed to be an unparalleled laboratory for athletes to grow spiritually by learning Christian values. The first premise of this assumption was that transformational change required some catalyst. Second, the emotional nature of competition regularly provides such catalysts. The women’s soccer coach explained:

it takes an unexpected emotional experience to create change. And I think . . . athletics is the perfect classroom for that. We have so many, you know that’s an emotional, I mean let’s just take this right here [points to a national championship picture on the wall]. In 1999 we stood on that grass and knew what it was like to be the best team in our division in the country. The next year we go back, outshoot a team 36–4, can’t score and lose. And both of those are extremely emotional experiences. And so if you buy the premise that transformation and change require intense emotional experience, not just intellectual rigor, athletics may be one of the most powerful classrooms there is.

When athletes were emotionally and intellectually vulnerable, coaches and administrators felt that athletes were then prepared to truly understand the significance of Christian values.

In particular, five Christian values were taught in the laboratory of intercollegiate athletics. First, self-discipline was emphasized by all coaches and was framed in a manner suggesting that athletes should make the appropriate decisions about their priorities and be held accountable for their decisions. To ensure that a lack of self-discipline was linked back to Christianity, some coaches ‘try to bring in some direct cuts or quotes in there and then say, “Okay, now think about this: how does that fit from a biblical standpoint?”’ Hard work was a second value developed in athletics and was often framed as a matter of faith. As the men’s soccer coach noted, ‘if an athlete claims that their motivation is to play for the glory or the honor of God, that ought to show itself in the effort category’. Perseverance was a third prominent value in PCC’s athletic culture. Again, the ability of athletes to ‘handle stress and struggles’ was linked to faith because there was a belief on the part of some coaches that athletes will ‘better understand their relationship with Christ because they will have suffered pain’. Humility and graciousness were two final values used to transform Mariner athletes. Coaches used both practice and competition to teach athletes how to be ‘humbled by victory’ and to ‘suffer through loss’. The women’s soccer coach illustrated this:

We get screwed out of a game that we should have won because of a bad call. That’s a great moment. That’s a great moment to try to connect to the larger world. And so I am very deliberate about, ‘Hey we learned something today about humility when we don’t think we have to be humble’.

The ability of athletes to undergo a 'life-changing experience' was highly dependent upon the faith and skill of the coaching staff. One administrator noted:

I would say the majority of our athletes are stronger in faith as a result of their athletic experience, and that's because the coach is explicit about it and talks about it. When you think of the opportunity that a coach has to influence an athlete as opposed to a history professor in the classroom; that gives you an opportunity for a relationship that the classroom doesn't provide. I mean there is no place to hide. The students get to know the coach in ways that they don't know the history professor.

Therefore, administrators hired and promoted coaches using very specific criteria. First, a master's degree was required for coaches because they taught academic courses. Second, as noted in a job announcement, PCC hired only evangelical Christians who could 'wholeheartedly embrace the mission of the college, relating their faith to their teaching, to their scholarship, and to their lives'. To ensure such a commitment, coaches, like all other faculty, were required to sign a statement of Christian faith. Third, to gain tenure or promotion, coaches must have demonstrated an ability to integrate faith into their programs. A basketball player explained how this was evaluated:

We do evaluations of our coach every year. We fill out a scan-tron, you know one through ten, about all these things. And then on the back there's different questions where you have a chance to write like, 'How does your coach model Christian behavior?' 'Does your coach promote [faith]?'

With such restrictive criteria, the president found 'the recruiting effort for new coaches is really hard'. Adding the third basic assumption, the expectation of success, made recruiting even more difficult.

Outwardly, winning was not as valued as the outcome as it was for the process. The opportunity for faith-related transformations to occur in the process of pursuing victory was most valued. The president believed that there were 'real benefits of coming together and trying to accomplish a particular task, and in that sense, of winning. But in the long run, I think the winning part really, in perspective, takes second place'. However, there were other indications that winning was of primary importance to the culture of Mariner athletics and was, therefore, a basic assumption.

The basis for this assumption was the tremendous history of success in the athletic department. As was outlined above, some of the NAIA's best athletes and coaches competed at PCC. So, there was a clear desire to perpetuate that tradition. Administrators supported this tradition as well. One coach described a 'breakfast meeting' held by the former president for all head coaches. 'He basically said we don't want to be good, we want to be the best. . . . We want to set the standard in all our sports of how to do things and of being winners'.

Administrators, as the assistant admissions director said, 'want to be successful athletically because it's a platform' to market the college. Success also encouraged 'people in the community to have a connection to PCC due to our sports programs'.

Third, administrators believed that winning teams assisted fund-raising efforts because ‘if [people] want to give donations, a lot of times they want to give it to athletics’. Finally, athletic success contributed to the reputation of overall excellence administrators desired for PCC.

you know we’re the Stanford of Christian colleges. . .just the idea that they win on the field and they’re second to none academically, you know things like that. I think in our current culture. . .its important to win because that’s who we view ourselves as in the community.

The coaching staff provided another indication of the importance of winning with its reaction to a proposed move to the National Collegiate Athletics Association’s (NCAA) Division III. The former president proposed the move as a way to improve the college’s academic reputation, but, without exception, all the coaches were adamantly opposed to the realignment. Coaches believed it could limit the ability of their programs to ‘be at the level where we are competing for conference and national championships’. Or they felt ‘we would pummel all Division III teams except for the top one, two, or three teams, and so the prospect of going down to offer an even less quality product is not very appealing to us’.

The clearest evidence of winning’s importance was two personnel decisions that occurred during the study. Most conspicuous was the dismissal of the baseball coach. While baseball was not a strong sport at PCC, many participants praised the coach for improving the moral quality of his players. A physics professor claimed:

the baseball coach has been here for two years and has had a dreadful won/loss record. I think this year he is something like 7–21. . . . But he has made a world of difference in terms of the character development of the students and the ministry he has with his athletes. And it will be interesting to see how that develops in the future.

Following another poor season, his contract was not renewed. This contrasted with the status of the women’s basketball coach, who had been at PCC for 4 years. During his second year the team placed second in the conference and qualified for the national tournament. Since then he had had a winning record every year and produced multiple all-conference players and two all-Americans. However, his style of coaching was not always well received by his players or fellow coaches. Following one season there was an extensive review of his conduct after, ‘several players went to Walter (the athletic director) and different coaches went to Walter’ due to complaints of verbal abuse and moodiness. One of his players described the situation:

sometimes after we lost, he’d be like really upset and the whole bus ride home he wouldn’t want to talk. We have TVs in our busses so we can watch movies and no one would ask to turn on a movie. You just want to sleep because you would be so scared, and that really sucks. That’s just his up and down moods.

Despite coaching in what one coach described as ‘a manner unbecoming of the institution’, he was retained. According to his assistant this was done so the college could help him grow.

*Role of religion*

These basic assumptions interacted to create an organizational culture in which religion clearly played a valuable role. The expectation of athletic success and the divine perception of athletic talent combined to make intercollegiate athletics a moral laboratory. The morals taught in this laboratory, hard work, discipline, perseverance, humility and graciousness, were connected to the Christian faith by coaches who wholeheartedly embraced these assumptions. As a result of this interplay, religion had two clear influences on the organizational culture.

Religion first influenced the membership of the athletic culture. National searches were officially and unofficially conducted to find coaches who maintained the appropriate mix of skill, Christian commitment and education to win and transform lives. Coaches were required to embrace the Christian perspective of the college and were evaluated on their ability to integrate faith into the athletic experience. To increase the likelihood of winning and creating Christian transformations in athletes, coaches recruited 'very, very carefully'. Logically, they sought talented athletes, but coaches also scrutinized recruits academically, spiritually and personally to ensure that they 'literally want to be at PCC'. What resulted was a culture whose members were driven, successful, spiritual and fitted seamlessly into the overall campus culture.

Second, religion influenced the operation of the athletic department. Most obviously, Christianity shaped the pedagogy and conduct of the coaches. Coaches were very purposeful about incorporating prayer into the athletic experience and used the unpredictability of sport as a means to create moral transformations in athletes. As noted above, faith influenced recruiting, but it also affected how athletes were dealt with. Coaches were concerned for their athletes spiritually, emotionally, socially and academically. Coaches were expected to role model 'living life whole', in other words demonstrate how faith could inform all aspects of life. And, as the former president noted, 'they model that really well'. Coaches accomplished this by living 'balanced' lives, making decisions consistent with Christian values and being active, visible Christians. Religion also governed decision-making in the athletic department. It influenced the budgeting process as well as fund raising. For example, a prospective donation from a local casino was nixed because it conflicted with the college's values. Religion also played a role in PCC remaining an NAIA member. One of the president's deciding factors against the proposed Division III move was that 'we have a tradition of playing schools that are in this [Christian] conference, like Baptist and Nazarene and . . . that would have had to be dispensed with'.

## **Discussion**

The assumptions and values of intercollegiate athletic departments have grown increasingly distinct from those of colleges and universities (Zimbalist, 1999; Suggs, 2003; Sperber, 2004). Recent events indicate that this value discrepancy exists even at prominent religious colleges (Wolfe, 2003). Yet, the results of this study indicate

that the cultural values and assumptions of intercollegiate athletic departments can be compatible with the cultures of their host institutions. By using Christian faith as a centerpiece, the intercollegiate athletic department remained a valued, functional subculture at PCC.

There are several reasons why these results contrast with the current literature on intercollegiate athletics culture. Partly, this difference can be attributed to a shift in the institution's culture. As explained earlier, the college culture had changed such that academic assumptions were just as important as Christian assumptions. However, athletics had little means of connecting to the academic assumptions, and for any subculture to remain integrated it must have some connection to the host culture's assumptions (Ott, 1989; Schein, 1992). Teaching religious morals was the athletic culture's clear link to PCC's institutional culture. By role modeling and coaching with a Christian perspective, coaches were acting consistently with other Christian faculty (Migliazzo, 2002). In doing so they were able to demonstrate intercollegiate athletics' relevance not only to the institutional mission, but also to Christian higher education as a whole (Christian College Consortium, 1999; Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2004). So, ultimately, religion's most significant role in PCC's athletic culture was to keep the department culturally relevant.

In addition, there were other reasons stemming from the organizational culture perspective that help explain PCC's cultural integration. First, when leaders have a clear understanding of an organizational culture they are better equipped to find ways to integrate subcultures (Schein, 1992). As a result of the institutional culture change, PCC's administrators had a clear understanding of their institution and the fit of intercollegiate athletics. PCC's ultimate goal was to teach students how religion could inform all aspects of life. Intercollegiate athletics was primarily seen as a way for the college to provide this education to a specific segment of the student body. Second, knowledge of the organizational culture facilitates personnel decisions that will establish and perpetuate a given culture (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Schein, 1992). PCC's leaders adhered to rigid hiring and promotional criteria in order to retain a coaching staff capable of integrating faith and sport. Third, when members of a culture are rewarded for acting on a set of assumptions, those assumptions become more deeply embedded in the culture and the culture becomes stronger (Schein, 1992). The athletic culture received several types of positive reinforcement for integrating faith. Teams won championships, athletes won awards, coaches earned tenure, boosters donated money and PCC earned recognition as a top Christian school. Due to such rewards, the members of the culture continued to embrace and support its assumptions.

The results offer hope to educators and administrators at all colleges and universities seeking to create more culturally appropriate athletic programs. Faith does not have to be (and at most institutions cannot be) the key link between the athletic department and the institution, but establishing how the athletic program fits into the institutional mission is a first step towards closing the cultural gap. Developing admissions, personnel and administrative policies consistent with a specific role for athletics is another possible step for administrators. Finally,

rewarding behaviors consistent with the desired cultural arrangement is an exceptional way of communicating new assumptions about the role of intercollegiate athletics in an institution.

These findings may be tempered by two limitations, but provide direction for future studies of organizational culture and faith. First, the study was carried out at a small, evangelical Christian college which is a member of the NAIA. Research examining colleges with a variety of religious affiliations (e.g. Catholic, Baptist and Mormon) would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of religion in intercollegiate athletic programs. Also, the degree to which institutional enrollment might influence the role of religion in athletics would be of interest. Religious institutions at the NCAA Division I level would provide an especially informative setting for these topics due to the economic pressures associated with ticket sales, television contracts and post-season appearances. Second, this study was limited because it focused on the perspective of campus leaders. Incorporating extensive student athlete perceptions could indicate the degree to which religion in athletics actually influences student development.

In conclusion, religion had a significant role in the organizational culture of PCC's intercollegiate athletic program. Faith affected the people that were hired and recruited and it influenced the way coaches conducted their programs. Perhaps most significantly, integrating faith also enabled the athletic department to remain a valued element of the campus culture. Beyond religion, the results of this study demonstrate the importance of attending to organizational culture. When leaders in higher education are aware of their institution's cultures and subcultures, they are better equipped to prevent the cultural separation that so often plagues intercollegiate athletics.

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