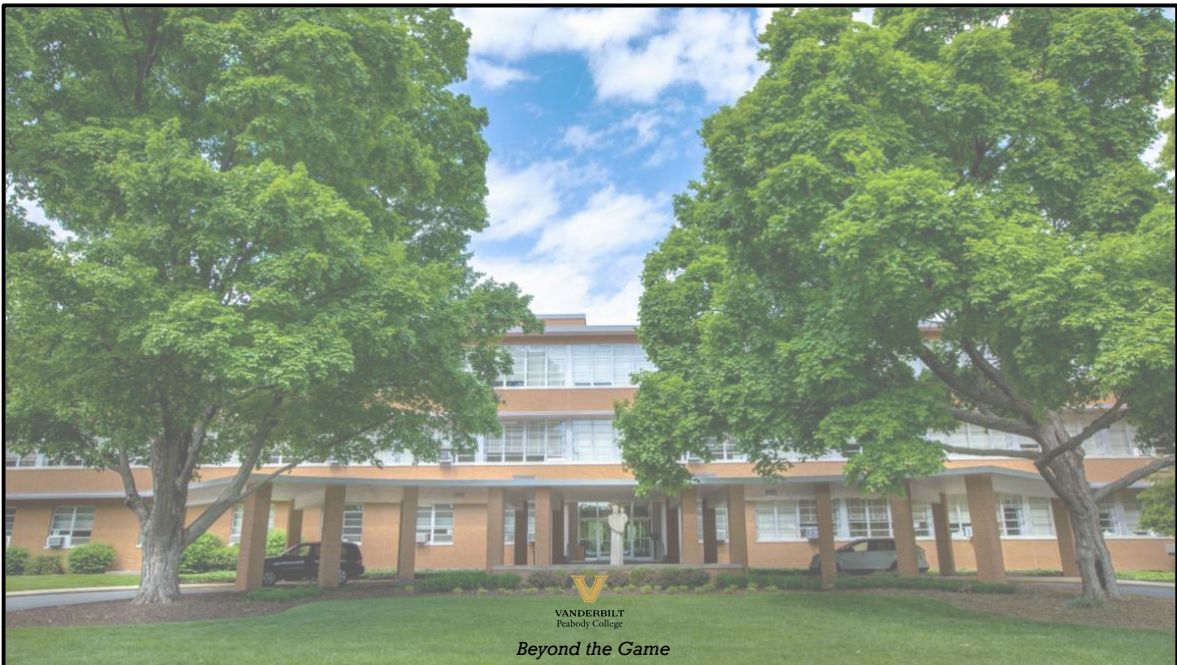


Beyond the Game: A qualitative exploration of divergent stakeholder narratives around a high school athletics program, and how to strategically leverage them.

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Executive Summary

This capstone project explored the possibilities for an independent school to strategically leverage the organizational narratives in and around its storied athletics program.

The school in question is St. Joseph's Academy (SJA), an all-girls high school in St. Louis known for decades as a destination for local female athletes (pictured on cover page). Although less regular are the days of stringing together consecutive state championships across sports such as basketball, volleyball, and soccer, SJA still enjoys consistent success locally, with regional and state titles still common in sports such as golf and tennis. But for a myriad of potential reasons – more private school competition; different student or parent expectations; club sport influences; and fluctuating definitions of athletic success, to name a few – current narratives surrounding the SJA athletics program vary widely across the spectrum of internal and external stakeholders. With some recent changes occurring at the highest levels of school leadership, the time is ripe for SJA to consider how these differing perspectives might be cohered and leveraged to benefit not only the athletic program, but also other school domains such as enrollment and advancement.

Our conceptual framework synthesized narrative theory and stakeholder theory in an effort to explore how understanding the complex function of organizational narratives might be managed and utilized in a way that helps school leadership recognize, acknowledge, and incorporate the views of different school stakeholders. Through interviews, focus groups, document and social media analysis, and analysis of parent surveys produced by, and provided to us by, the school, our qualitative study sought to make sense of existing narratives in context of the athletic program's rich history, and present to school leaders a set of findings and

recommendations that could allow them to more strategically leverage the present perspectives across a variety of school domains.

The findings of our study suggest that the school could benefit from increased collaboration and cleared communication between its athletic program and the other school domains with whom athletics could have a reciprocally-beneficial relationships – domains such as enrollment, advancement, and marketing. Moreover, we observed a desire for the athletics program to be more innovative in a variety of areas, as well as noticeable opportunities for other school domains to make more strategic use of key athletic narratives both past and present. Finally, our findings point to a need for the school to unify the significance of the athletics program vis a vis its larger school identity.

With divergent viewpoints on how important athletics is to the SJA brand, one of our overarching recommendations is that the school take intentional steps to clarify how it wants to position itself within the St. Louis scholastic community, especially when it comes to the role of its athletic program. We also encourage the school to take more intentional ownership over the communication pathways that involve athletics narratives, and to make some small-yet-significant systemic adjustments to ensure that the management of these narratives never falls by the wayside.

As much as the focus of our study was St. Joseph's Academy and its unique athletic context, our hope is that in addition to helping them codify and leverage their particular narratives in the interest of institutional outcomes, we might also present opportunities for other independent high schools to think more strategically about the ways in which they utilize their own athletics programs in light of organizational narratives and stakeholder perspectives.

Organizational Context

St. Joseph's Academy (SJA) is a highly prestigious all-girls day school, serving the St. Louis, MO area. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet have been operating the school for nearly two centuries. SJA has a deep history rooted in outstanding service learning, leadership development, and instilling the confidence to advocate for oneself and one another. SJA currently enrolls 572 students coming to the school from over 63 different zip codes. Last year's graduating class had just over 130 students in the senior class. The school offers a full slate of Advanced Placement (AP) courses with many other advanced options for students to choose from. After examining their senior class college acceptance and matriculation, SJA graduates are attending incredibly varied and broad geographical locations around the world, and a diverse range of educational institutions. 100% of their graduates are accepted into colleges and universities. 94% of graduates received some type of scholarship to college. Nearly all graduates took the ACT and the average score from last year's class was a 31, nearly 12 points higher than the national average in 2022. SJA's academic profile and outcomes are impressive. In addition to SJA's academic outcomes, the school's athletic program has been on a fifty-year run of unprecedented success. Since 1975, the Angels, as their teams are known, have won more than 60 team state championships and more than 20 championships at the individual level. So successful was SJA through the turn of the century that Sports Illustrated named the Angels the Best High School Athletic Program in Missouri. Among the school's noteworthy athletic alumnae is Kristin Folkl (class of '94), who won state championships in basketball and volleyball in every year that she played before moving on to play both sports at Stanford. She would eventually play in the 1996 Summer Olympics as part of the U.S. women's volleyball team.

Over the last year, a new president of SJA, M.N., has been hired. Even though she served as a trustee and is a parent of an alumna, she is new to this role and experiencing the many dynamics that come with being a new leader of a school. In her first year, the president is actively watching and listening to stakeholders in the organization, attempting to learn as much about the past to inform her work leading the school into the future (M.N., personal communication, October 2022). This change in leadership has given the school an opportunity to be reflective about their programming, marketing, admissions, and many more domains of the school operations. While the new president is closely listening and learning, there are also many opinions, perspectives, and narratives emerging from SJA stakeholders. Her previous experience as a trustee and parent carries important implications regarding her interpretations in this new role. In an initial conversation with her, she admitted that she is grappling with interpreting, prioritizing, and responding to positive and negative feedback regarding the athletics department at SJA (M.N., personal communication, October 2022).

Significance of the Problem of Practice

Although the history of the athletics program remains a point of pride at SJA, there is concern from various stakeholder groups that the athletic program isn't improving from year to year and might even be experiencing some areas of decline; moreover, this perceived decline might, according to some stakeholders, be inhibiting other school outcomes such as marketing, development, and admissions.

After reviewing parent survey data spanning the last three years, there certainly appeared to be trends in the department that raise concerns, even given the levels of success to which the school has become accustomed. Although the rate of sports championship titles is decreasing,

SJA continues to win state championships regularly in multiple sports, confirmed by recent data provided by the school, detailing team performance over the last few decades.

The school president informed us in a preliminary conversation that she regularly hears widely varied perspectives on the athletics program, and needed help navigating the feedback (M.N., personal communication, October 2022). M.N. openly admitted that she is not a “sports person” and is having trouble understanding the broader meaning behind these perspectives; in our discussions she wondered if any action steps should be taken. Following decades of extraordinary success in athletics, school leaders had grown curious about how enrollment, marketing, and development at SJA were impacted by the athletic department’s outcomes, and the narratives associated with them. Stakeholders, such as coaches, current student-athletes and their parents, and athletic alumnae remain deeply connected, both to SJA athletics and to one another, by the narratives that align with these levels of athletic success. As suggested in the literature, and verified in our conversations with school leaders, long-term sustainability across institutional domains is impacted by stakeholder perceptions of the athletic department (Hodgkinson & Sparrow, 2002).

Understanding the vast array of athletics-centric narratives, and school leaders knowing how to interpret and strategically leverage them across different domains, has become more and more problematic for the organization. To help SJA manage the diverse and evolving narratives surrounding the athletic department, we collected and analyzed data that can help guide their work in the identification, interpretation, and strategic leveraging of those narratives to ensure long-term sustainability for the athletic department and the school. We investigated how organizations craft narratives and how they leverage those narratives to inform and guide the organization through new strategic periods.

The continuous construction and articulation of distinct narratives runs the risk of weakening the identity of an organization if the narrative process is not properly managed and leveraged. Chreim (2005) notes that “each text produced by organizational authors destabilizes the organization constructed in previous texts...this is particularly evident in times of change, when continuity may be no more than a rhetorical construction” (p. 588). Newly into an administrative regime change and wrestling with how to situate its athletics program in a contemporary context, SJA is at a critical juncture with regard to codifying emergent narratives surrounding athletics. Failure to do so could lead to internal or external conflicts, misperceptions, or disagreements that inhibit institutional outcomes across domains (Chreim, 2005), especially in a situation when any official narratives deriving from school leadership are subverted elsewhere (Boje, 1995).

Still, with such a deeply-rooted history in athletics, SJA’s narratives can serve as a catalyst to help the community understand its broader collective identity. Our goal in inquiry was to arrive at recommendations which would arm SJA with communication strategies rooted in evidence that will maximize impact across the organization in the service of athletic, admissions, and advancement objectives.

Conversations with school leaders revealed that there is specific concern about the feasibility of sustained athletic distinction; specifically, the problem from their vantage point was how to strategically assess and address narratives about SJA’s athletic program from parents, student-athletes, staff, alumnae, and administration (M.N., personal communication, October 2022; K.D., personal communication, 2022). Our hope is that through our research and analysis, SJA will be able to leverage perceptions and narratives in a way that will enhance a collective understanding of identity in the organization.

Along with informal conversations with SJA administrators, our preliminary research consisted of examining secondary data including parent surveys and historical athletics data. This preliminary exposure to the school revealed fragmentation of the narratives around the athletics program. Along with general worry about declining success on the court or field, there were prevailing concerns about auxiliary school outcomes. We hypothesized that the domains of enrollment, marketing, and development were all linked to internal and external stakeholder narratives around athletics.

Review of Literature

Impact of athletics on scholastic domains

Although scholarship is limited in terms of the impact of athletics departments on other domains within secondary schools, there are many existing studies that focus on that dynamic in higher education, which this literature review will use as a model for analysis of St. Joseph's Academy and its equivalents.

Athletics and Admissions Applications

Writing for the *Journal of Sport Management* about the effects of university athletics on universities, Goff (2000) framed his analysis around a question that he believed is asked by collegiate educators everywhere: "outside of hardcore fans, are there enough people who care so strongly about athletics to alter enrollments, giving, and other oft-touted outcomes?" (p. 91). Although he considered some of his data "anecdotal," given the lack of in-depth, long-term methodologies available, Goff did find statistically significant increases – with respect to years both preceding and following - in applications to Georgia Tech during the three years

immediately following its national football championship in 1990 (2000). In an analysis of other college athletics programs experiencing success (or lack thereof), Goff (2000) argued that “major achievements in athletics appear to spark additional interest from prospective students, even at schools with highly rated academic programs” (p. 96). Having chosen such schools as Georgia Tech, Northwestern, and Southern Methodist, among others, for his research, Goff concluded that sports success was likely an application driver for schools regardless of whether or not that school was particularly “known for” its sports programs, or whether those schools even traditionally recruited students using those grounds.

Frank (2004) conceded that well-performing sports teams often allow schools to see an increase in admissions applications and thus become more selective. A team of scholars from Middle Tennessee State University and Pacific Lutheran University argued that “success on the field of play potentially can be a driver of applications by prospective students” (Roy, et al., 2008, p. 13). The focus of the study was on collegiate football programs, but the suggested relationship between athletic success and student applications is one that SJA has long relied upon regarding its own enrollment (K. Davis, personal communication, February 8, 2023). The link between those two scholastic domains was further validated by Pope and Pope (2009), whose research results “suggest that sports success can affect the number of incoming applications and, through a school’s selectivity, the quality of the incoming class” (p. 752). Their findings, derived from an analysis of “school applications, SAT scores, control variables, and various athletic success indicators” (2009, p. 751) further delineated a distinction between private and public institutions of higher education vis a vis athletic success and admissions: within relatively-equal levels of success, private schools saw an average of two to four times more applicants following athletic success than their public counterparts. While there is no

comparable public school application process at the secondary school level, it is noteworthy, especially in a competitive landscape of private schools, that athletic success can be such a major driver of enrollment outcomes for those types of institutions in particular.

Athletics and Giving

As part of his examination of the cross-domain effects of anomalous athletic success at both Georgia Tech and Northwestern, who in 1995 won its first Big-10 football championship in 60 years, Goff also noted a substantial increase in financial giving at both institutions following the achievements (2000). The degree of these successes is critical; Goff (2000) argues that any relationship between sporting performance and annual giving “may depend...on the specific circumstances surrounding the athletic success (e.g., how ‘big’ and how novel the success was)” (p. 101). Research out of Lake Forest College appears to corroborate Goff’s belief that in order for a school to see a significant sports-related increase in giving, the athletic success must be particularly noteworthy; the results of the study, which focused on college football and basketball, “suggest that a bowl or tournament bid legitimizes a good record, while a good record without a postseason appearance is very disappointing” (Baade & Sundberg, 1996, p. 801). That is to say, a team’s win-loss record, no matter how good in a given year, likely is not enough to draw a considerable increase in donations to the school. Postseason successes, however, appear to be a more consistent driver of giving activity. This finding might be of particular significance in our transliteration of these studies to the high school ranks, where historically-dominant athletic programs might unwittingly raise the bar of what is considered a “big” outcome at their respective sites.

Data analyzed for the Economics of Education Review in 2009 did reveal a small yet statistically-significant relationship between a college athlete's sporting performance and their giving levels post-graduation (Meer & Rosen). The implication of these results is that an alumna who played sports at a given school is more likely to donate generously if their former team was successful. Such data certainly incentivizes a school to place a high degree of importance on the performance of its athletic teams in the longer-term interest of securing donations from those athletes upon their eventual graduation. The work of Meer and Rosen focused specifically on athletics, while operating in theoretical alignment with the research target of Clotfelter (2003): "the personal experiences that often link donors to the organizations to which they donate" (p. 119). In studying this correlation at the college level, Clotfelter (2003) noted the importance of "expressed satisfaction" for a school experience in projecting alumni giving habits (p. 114). One could argue, then, that it is important for a private school such as SJA to not only prioritize a successful athletics program, but also to consider the ways in which it might strategically allow for opportunities for its alumnae to express their satisfaction in a way that might subsequently catalyze habits of giving.

Athletics and Marketing

Determining the metrics for "success" within a given athletic department is a critical component of leveraging said success for marketing purposes. A variety of school-specific contextual factors dictate whether a certain season, team, or player might be considered successful, and different stakeholders around a given site likely have different perspectives on positive sporting outcomes (Gladden, et al., 1998). Development and sustainment of brand equity when it comes to school athletics relies largely, according to Gladden, et al., on both the

expectations and the history of the program in question (1998). To best leverage its sports outcomes in their respective marketplaces, schools would be well-served to strategically identify what athletic success looks like in their particular contexts, taking into account expectations and history (Gladden, et al., 1998).

Outside of direct on-court or on-field success as determined by wins, championships, or postseason appearances, Gladden and colleagues also cite prestigious coaches and star players as more individualized, charisma-driven pathways to building an athletic program's brand equity (1998). Celebrated leaders, in the form of coaches, and record- or scholarship-chasing athletes can both catalyze interest in a program even in the absence of collective team success. That phenomenon may even be truer at the high school level, where a deep talent pool is harder to maintain, but where a particular homegrown hero might generate zealous interest among a local community, if only for a short time.

Popular individuals within an athletics program, be they coaches or athletes, can help contribute to a positive image for the school as a whole. Research by Mourad, et al. (2010), found that "the brand is a significant influence on the selection of a university," and that "image-related determinants were the major drivers of brand equity" (p. 415), defined in this context as "the overall utility that the consumer associates with the use and consumption of the brand; including associations expressing both functional and symbolic utilities" (Vazquez, et al., 2002, p. 28). According to the scholars, other brand image attributes critical to the development of a school's brand equity include service-focused attributes such as "perceived quality" and provider-focused attributes such as "relationships" and "staff" (Mourad, et al., 2010). With respect to the larger workings of a secondary school, athletics programs can represent key proxies for each of the attributes above, especially at sites where sports play such a starring role

in the rhetorical history of the institution. An athletic program's ability to be perceived as quality, then, as well as the nature of its external relations and the effectiveness of its personnel should all be viewed as significant drivers for the brand equity of the larger school.

Though private high schools do not boast the same scale of recruiting resources as their higher-education counterparts, the market exposure that a successful athletics program offers the former is still valuable relative to the populations of their respective markets. Frank (2004) favorably compared the impact of an accomplished college athletics department with that of an effective advertising campaign, and noted that even if direct revenue is an issue for a major college athletic program, indirect benefits achieved through marketing might fully offset any shortfalls. Moreover, Roy, et al. (2008) note that "athletics is a source of exposure for almost every institution" and can be critical in building a school's brand equity (p. 15). Said equity can be critical for the image of a school relative to its particular target marketplace. Gladden, et al. (1998), note that "because the sport product is elusive by nature, measuring its value rests on consumers' perceptions of the product" (p. 2). At the high school level, especially within large metropolitan areas with a high number of competitive schools (M. Niedringhaus, personal communication, November 4, 2022), maintaining brand equity via the success of sports programs can be a necessary component of strategic marketing.

Alumni Relations and Engagement:

SJA's website shares that 97% of its students played at least one sport while attending the school, meaning nearly every student had an athletic experience – that makes the alumnae population a critically-important stakeholder group for our research (SJA Athletics, 2022; Meer & Rosen, 2009). In our earliest conversations with SJA administration, there were numerous

comments about their perception of SJA's positive place in their alumnae's lives, regardless of when decade they graduated (M. Niedringhaus, personal communication, October 8, 2022, and K. Davis, personal communication, December 1, 2022). Maintaining connections with alumnae offers opportunities for organizations like SJA that cross into business-related domains of the institution, such as giving of their time, money, and support of the school (Frisby, et al., 2019). Engagement of SJA alumnae might deepen the connections they have to the institution and firm up the identification they have with the school.

Scholarship asserts that organizations like SJA should be strategic and deliberate in how they message and network with their alumnae base (McNamee, 2021; Meer & Rosen, 2009). Former teachers, former coaches, or administration are all positioned to send "meaningful messages," which can have a significant impact on alumnae and lead to stronger feelings of identity and place within the current school environment; that increased sense of identity can lead to long-term engagement with the school (Frisby, et al., 2019). From a communication standpoint, research points to the value of engaging alumni by bringing them back to campus to work with students, athletes, and former teachers (McNamee, 2021). McNamee argues that utilizing the alumni base to support both a school's daily operations and its larger strategic goals can be effective. Similar to meaningful messaging, seeking deep levels of involvement from alumni can serve as a targeted, intentional approach to support other institutional domains. Research shows that these targeted and personalized approaches to communication can build trust in an organization even when the organization is experiencing changes in leadership, as is the case at SJA (Frisby, et al., 2019). Building relationships and rapport when there are new teachers, coaches, and administration is likely to deepen identification, loyalty, and commitment of alumni.

Communication Methods and Loyalty Behaviors

As the research suggests, there are specific ways to communicate with alumni that engage them more effectively and offer them opportunities to continue to grow their identity within SJA, well beyond their days as a student. Another stakeholder group for whom institutional loyalty is likely to be particularly meaningful is the parent population. One body of research focused on categorizing types of parents and offering advice to coaches in particular on how to most effectively communicate with each parent category. A positive relationship with a coach, along with strategic and personalized communication strategies, can make a meaningful difference in the experience the student-athlete has on that particular team (Van Mullem, 2015). A positive experience with a coach and with the team increases the likelihood of that student and family being loyal to the organization.

A 2005 study on communication in a junior high school examined the incongruities among communication methods from school personnel and parents. School personnel, such as coaches and teachers, tend to use broad, institutionalized methods, such as whole-class or grade-level emails, midterms, and report cards. Parents, the study concluded, prefer more personalized communication. This difference in preference of communication can lead to misunderstandings, misperceptions, and disjointed narratives about student experiences (Halsey). Such feelings can negatively impact relationships, leading to lower parent satisfaction and a decrease in loyalty behaviors. Halsey's work offers evidence-based approaches for matching communication expectations and needs. Although our work focuses primarily on communicating cohesive narratives to stakeholders, we cannot overlook strategies at a micro-level among coaches, athletes, and parents. When communication is effectively executed, relationships flourish and

trust increases. Two key indicators of organizational loyalty are trust and happiness (Aksoy, et al., 2015). Schools that are successful at implementing strategies that enhance both are far more likely to experience productive, long-term loyalty behaviors across stakeholder groups.

Funk and James, in their 2006 research on consumer attachment specifically in sports organizations, found a need for the organizations seeking loyalty to procure allegiance through functional, emotional, and symbolic meanings. The authors concluded that their results “provide sport organizations with evidence to direct efforts for developing marketing communications designed to foster the creation of positive associations” (Funk & James, 2006, p. 208). Their focus on the developmental process of allegiance suggests that a key aspect of generating loyalty in a sporting context is meaning-making for the consumer via “thoughts, images, and ideas related to a sport object” (Funk & James, 2006, p. 191). That is, in pursuing stakeholder loyalty, it is incumbent upon an athletic organization to tactfully construct positive narratives around its salient artifacts in the effort of promoting consumer loyalty.

Rhetorical history and organizational sensemaking

Among the strategic challenges facing SJA is the navigation of different narratives surrounding the athletic department, vis a vis its larger organizational identity. This larger identity refers to both what we will call the horizontal” scope of the school – the athletic department’s relationship to the other divisions, departments, and stakeholder groups within the school’s current construct – as well as its “vertical” scope: both the past and the future of the athletics program and SJA at large. The school’s past athletic success can be viewed as what organizational theory researchers call “an important symbolic resource in its own right”

(Suddaby, et al., 2010, p. 149). Accordingly, SJA could use its tradition of success not as a source of pressure, but rather as a competitive advantage through strategic storytelling.

SJA's athletics program faces the challenge of navigating a diverse array of stakeholders: staff members, leaders, coaches, student-athletes, parents, alumnae, and donors. Effective sensemaking needs to occur in order for a unified narrative around the athletics program to exist – Karl E. Weick, cited by Suddaby, et al. (2010), writes that any kind of organizational sensemaking is really a “retrospective activity in which many possible meanings need to be synthesized” (p. 152). One of our initial observations is that SJA is struggling to reconcile the contemporary status of its athletic department within its larger historical context. The more strategically the school can fit its modern athletic chapter into its grander narrative, the more effective it will likely be in its efforts at cohesive sensemaking, and subsequently leveraging a unified athletics narrative to impact strategic goals for the entire organization. Glynn (2008) argues that organizational identities are constructed via “institutional bricolage,” wherein the organization being studied is able to “incorporate cultural meanings, values, sentiments and rules into their identity claims” (p. 47). Given the athletic department's history of championships and successful alumnae, and given the seemingly deep-seated value placed on the department (Niedringhaus, personal communication, and Davis, personal communication), SJA appears to have the resources necessary to intentionally and meaningfully build and sustain a cohesive identity around its athletics program.

Narrative Theory

Among the changing environmental factors specifically cited by school leaders as affecting its athletic department are: a growing inability to attract and retain high-quality

coaches; increasing levels of dissatisfaction amongst new generations of parents and student-athletes; changing economic conditions in St. Louis making private school less viable for some; and an influx in competition, from both other schools and local club programs, for the participation of the area's top female athletes (M. Niedringhaus, personal communication, October 11, 2022, and K. Davis, personal communication, February 8, 2023). Moreover, the school is in the midst of a leadership transition, with the new president soon to be completing her first school year. Gioia and Thomas (1996) argue that "under conditions of strategic change, then, it is...envisioned identity and image that imply the standards for interpreting important issues" (p. 1). When a school is in moments of strategic change, the process of envisioning allows you to interpret issues and make decisions through the lens of a *desired* identity. When trying to manage this change, the organization needs to envision what it wants the change to be, as opposed to the present reality being the focal point. With such impactful layers of change affecting the athletic department in different ways, it seems incumbent upon school leaders to envision – and communicate – a narrative around the program that is interpretive of its modern context.

According to Brown (2006), narratives are critical to helping organizations understand their collective identities. Rather than using an organizational identity to inform specific narratives, Brown argues for the inverse: that narratives, as being in "a perpetual state of becoming," are what allow organizations to fully recognize key aspects of their identities. Within this framework, we note that an organization like SJA is in a "continuous process of narration — the very fabric of the organization is constantly being created and re-created through the elaboration, consideration, and exchange of narratives" (Brown, 2006, p. 735). We aim to explore how school leaders can navigate the continuous process of narration laid out by Brown;

as different narratives around athletics continue to develop amongst the variety of stakeholders, how might SJA codify those narratives strategically, and then leverage them in ways that might benefit their marketing, enrollment, and development arms?

Chreim reinforces the notion of “organizational identity as a narrative construction” (2005). Important to understanding the nature of SJA’s athletic identity specifically within the context of change is Chreim’s (2005) assertion that “identity narratives are not simply internally generated;...they import themes from the external environment...that are consistent with current and foreseen organizational undertakings” (p. 588). Chreim adds that these identity narratives contain both “cultural and historical artifacts,” both of which will be necessary to our understanding of how the current narratives regarding SJA athletics are inextricable from the program’s past and from its larger environmental context. We aim to situate our analysis of contemporary narratives – and their impact, both present and projected – within a larger consideration of the program’s historic success and envisioned future.

Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory, as presented by 21st century scholars, allows us to study, among other organizational phenomena, why different stakeholders influence organizations in different ways; why some stakeholders have more influence over organizations than others; why only some stakeholders are regarded as legitimate by organizations; and how and why the organization/stakeholder relationship changes over time (Friedman & Miles, 2002). The analytical perspectives provided via stakeholder theory will help us examine SJA athletics through the lens of the dynamics among institutional leaders, coaches, students, and alumnae. Using stakeholder theory in our work with SJA should guide our ability to classify the identities

of different stakeholders around the school's athletic department, understand the range of perceptions about the department, and make recommendations about any potential growth, improvement, or maintenance thereof (Miles, 2017).

Anecdotally it seems that differing opinions regarding the perceived success of SJA athletics has to do with changing environmental factors: changes in the competitive landscape of the St. Louis area; changes in the demographics of the school (with different populations come different value systems); changes in the economic factors that influence a private high school's athletics program; and changes in the nature and appeal of high school coaching (Niedringhaus, personal communication). Existing studies on sports industry change suggest a necessary cohesion in response to organizational change, with specific attention paid to "organizational history and tradition" and "institutional support and politics" (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011). Our study of stakeholder perceptions of SJA athletics will necessarily consider the impact of changing environmental factors; within these new trajectories, how might SJA athletics leaders manage stakeholder expectations (Hodgkinson & Sparrow, 2002)? To what degree should the various stakeholders surrounding SJA athletics partner in identifying and creating the department's "value" (Freudenreich, et al., 2019)? And finally, what systems or processes exist – or could exist – to optimize the relationships among all stakeholders, unify perceptions of athletic department success, and yield a robust vision for achieving departmental goals (Gordon, 2012; Parris, et al., 2016)?

Conceptual Framework and Project Questions

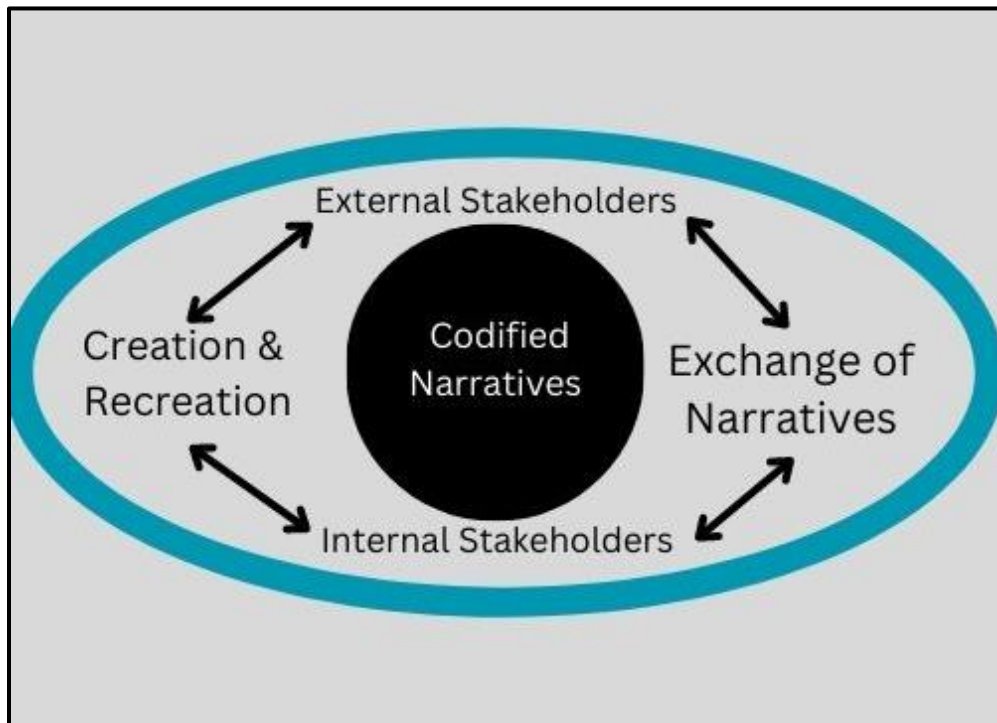
An examination of St. Joseph's contemporary athletic department in both horizontal and vertical contexts catalyzed a blending of narrative theory and stakeholder theory into the

development of the conceptual framework that informed our methodology. While the former suggested that differing narratives ought to be unified in the interest of harnessing a cohesive organizational identity, the latter advised an intentional, strategic management of all the different stakeholders surrounding the group in question.

Taken together, these respective theories help organizational leaders not only understand the nature and impact of narratives on collective identity, but also be better equipped to codify and leverage those narratives into a cohesive communication strategy that harnesses the story of the athletics program – past, present, and future – in a way that positively impacts the school at large.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Our project questions were as follows:

1. What are the current perspectives of SJA athletics among stakeholders, and what affiliated narratives stem from those perspectives?
2. In what ways does SJA communicate about its athletics program to its stakeholders and broader St. Louis community, and what is the content of those communications?
3. How can SJA strategically communicate codified narratives around athletics that benefit enrollment, marketing, and development for the greater institution?

Study Design and Methodology

This study utilized an exploratory approach that integrated both primary and secondary data sources. To answer the aforementioned project questions, we aimed to gather the requisite data via a combination of interviews, focus groups, and document and social media analysis. The study does not presume to represent a wider population, but rather aims to explore human experience within a given context (Babbie, 2007). The joint effort of primary and secondary data sourcing allowed us a degree of triangulation that increased our confidence in the research data, given the diversity and quantity available for analysis (Guion, et al., 2011).

The chart below details how each part of the methodology maps onto the research questions and the data sought to answer our project questions.

Table 1

Methodology Map

Project Question	Data Needed	Collection Instrument
<p>What are the current perspectives of SJA Athletics within key stakeholder groups, and what affiliated narratives stem from those perspectives?</p>	<p>Stakeholder feedback on current status of the athletic program, relative to what it has been in the past (over multiple decades) Stakeholders that key to our study include: alumnae, employees in the athletic department, school leadership, and parents of students.</p>	<p>Parent & student survey results provided by the school; interviews with school leaders; focus groups with alumnae, coaches, parents, and student-athletes.</p>
<p>In what ways does SJA communicate about its athletic program to its stakeholders and broader St. Louis community, and what is the content of those communications?</p>	<p>What does the school website say about the athletics program? How is the current program described? How much space is given to the history of the program? How prominent is athletics-centric content on the school website? (Internal communications: handbooks? Mission statement(s)? Code of conduct?) What do the school’s social media channels post about the athletics program? How are those posts framed? How often are they posting? What is the nature of these posts (championships? Successes? What criteria is used for posting?)</p>	<p>Examination of school web pages; following of school’s social media feeds; receipt and observation of school’s marketing materials, both hard- and soft-copy; documentation of brick-and-mortar messaging via on-site field notes.</p>

	<p>What do admissions, development, alumnae relations, and other marketing publications communicate about athletics? Visual and text?</p> <p>What is being communicated about Athletics in leadership-level correspondence (i.e., President’s or Principal’s Reports? Strategic plans?)</p>	
<p>How can SJA strategically communicate codified narratives around athletics that benefit institutional enrollment and development?</p>	<p>Identification of communication strategies used in terms of leveraging the athletics department for other scholastic outcomes.</p> <p>What are the communications systems and messages currently in place, specifically for athletics? How often/to what degree are representatives of different school domains collaborating to maximize agreed-upon objectives and messaging?</p> <p>Consideration of best practices in contextual communication strategy.</p>	<p>Interview and focus group data; review of literature on narrative and stakeholder theory</p>

Among the benefits of qualitative research espoused by Peshkin (1993), he notes that “problem finding is a type of insight that may result from interpretation. To know what is problematic about a...school is to have learned something of value” (p. 26). The interpretative nature of our methodology was designed to help crystallize the problems surrounding SJA’s

athletics department with regards to divergent stakeholder perspectives. Our desire to “clarify and understand the complexity” of the narrative dynamics surrounding this athletics program led us to an interpretative approach, one that we felt was necessary given the applicability to this context of Peshkin’s (1993) argument that “most of what we study is truly complex, relating to people, events, and situations characterized by more variables than anyone can manage to identify, see in relationship, or operationalize” (p. 27). We certainly believe this manner of variegated complexity exists in and around SJA athletics.

Although our methodology was primarily qualitative, many of our lines of inquiry were catalyzed by quantitative data in the form of survey results provided to us by SJA in the fall of 2022. At the onset of our interactions with the school, the president’s office provided us with athletics-specific excerpts end-of-year parent surveys given via SurveyMonkey in each of the last three school years (Spring 2020, Spring 2021, and Spring 2022). These surveys paired quantitative results to multiple-choice questions with parent responses provided to open-ended questions. In 2020, the survey was taken by 215 parents, with the athletics-specific questions provided to us yielding responses from 172-173 parents. In 2021, the survey was taken by 308 parents, with the athletics-specific questions provided to us yielding responses from 183-231 parents. In 2022, the survey was taken by 259 parents, with the athletics-specific questions provided to us yielding responses from 62-201 parents. Survey questions and results from each year are included in Appendix A.

We chose to examine such documents as school marketing and admissions materials; and school social media content in no small part due to what Bowen (2009) refers to as major advantages of document analysis: that it “counters the concerns related to reflexivity inherent in other qualitative research methods” (p. 31), and that, “as a corollary to being non-reactive,

documents are stable. The investigator's presence does not alter what is being studied" (p. 31). Given the potential sensitivity of the issues addressed via our interview and focus group instruments, we wanted to ensure that we were supplementing those components of the methodology with that which is considered stable and non-reflexive.

As part of our study design, we wanted to make sure to build in time and space for what Gibbs refers to as "structured debriefing" in the consideration of emergent themes (1988). The inclusion of field notes, produced collaboratively by us before, during and after our visit to the school, allowed us to incorporate such reflection themes as how conversations with stakeholders were making us feel; how we could evaluate the holistic nature of our site visit vis a vis our project questions; and how we could make sense of both the interpersonal and systemic observations and takeaways experienced onsite.

As delineated above, we incorporated both focus groups and individual interviews into the design of our study. We believed that the combination of these different methods would allow us to leverage the strengths of each within our topical context. Morgan (1997) notes that what focus groups "do best is produce an opportunity to collect data from groups discussing topics of interest to the researcher" (p. 16). Due to the exploratory nature of our protocols, we chose to include focus groups to allow for free-flowing conversations about SJA athletics, a topic in which our participants possessed deeper levels of expertise than we did as facilitators; Morgan (1997) refers to "this ability to give the group control over the direction of the interview" as being "especially useful in exploratory research" (p. 11). Still, as Agar and MacDonald (1995) suggest, "the individual interview opens large spaces for an individual voice to articulate the texture of his or her world, something that seldom happens in a focus group" (p. 81). Our hope was that the joint employment of individual interviews and focus groups would produce depth,

elaboration, and vulnerability via the former, in conjunction with the breadth, creativity, and solidarity offered by the latter.

In designing our interview and focus group instruments (see samples below in Table 2), we organized our questions in a manner that moved from “broad and less threatening or sensitive to specific and more complex” (Billups, 2021, p. 45). Because we were so new to the site and were meeting many of our interviewees for the very first time in the context of the interviews, we were particularly intentional about designing instruments that could aid in “building trust and rapport between interviewer[s] and interviewee[s] and [allow] for the story to emerge” (Billups, 2021, p. 45). Within that framework, we opted for a semi-structured approach to our interviews that provided a degree of topical direction from us, while still allowing necessary opportunities for follow-up questions from us, and for potentially-unprompted elaboration from the interviewees (Gill, et al., 2008). After beginning with broad questions regarding the interviewees’ general feelings towards the SJA athletics programs, we gradually moved into more specific lines of inquiry that aimed to address our specific research focuses of extent narratives and the divergence of stakeholder perspectives. Regardless of the content of any elaboration or follow-up questions, we made sure to end each interview with an open-ended question about their perspective on SJA athletics, one that would “allow the participants a chance to debrief or communicate any final thoughts, clarification, or comments that still need to be shared” (Billups, 2021, p. 51).

Table 2

Sample Interview and Focus Group Instruments (see Appendix B for full list of questions)

Project Question	Sample Interview Questions	Conceptual Framing
<p>What are the current perspectives of SJA Athletics within key stakeholder groups, and what affiliated narratives stem from those perspectives?</p> <p>What are the current perspectives of SJA Athletics within key stakeholder groups, and what affiliated narratives stem from those perspectives?</p>	<p>Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph’s athletics program. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you?</p> <p>In your role as XXX, what are the major topics, themes, or storylines around athletics that emerge from <i>external</i> stakeholders? To what degree are you involved in communications about athletics back to any external stakeholders?</p>	<p>“...identity narratives are not simply internally generated;...they import themes from the external environment” (Chreim, 2006)</p> <p>“...identity narratives are not simply internally generated;...they import themes from the external environment” (Chreim, 2006)</p>
<p>In what ways does SJA communicate about its athletic program to its stakeholders and broader St. Louis community, and what is the content of those communications?</p>	<p>How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it?</p> <p>How often is the athletics program discussed with SJA colleagues in your daily work? With whom are you having these conversations?</p>	<p>“...continuous process of narration — the very fabric of the organization is constantly being created and re-created through the elaboration, consideration, and exchange of narratives” (Brown, 2006).</p>

	<p>What, in general, is the nature of these discussions?</p>	
<p>How can SJA strategically communicate codified narratives around athletics that benefit institutional enrollment and development?</p>	<p>Describe how important you think the St. Joseph’s athletic department is to the larger school identity?</p> <p>From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why?</p> <p>From your specific perspective, is there anything else that you believe would help us better understand how SJA approaches unified understanding about the role of its athletic program on campus?</p>	<p>“...under conditions of strategic change, then, it is...envisioned identity and image that imply the standards for interpreting important issues” (Gioia & Thomas, 1996)</p>

Data Collection

We integrated both primary and secondary sources in our data collection. For the former, we conducted 11 interviews and 4 focus groups. While we conducted preliminary with a sampling of school leaders over Zoom in the fall and winter of 2023, all formal interviews and focus groups took place during our two-day visit to the St. Louis campus in April 2023. We spent an entire school day and another half-day on-site.

We interviewed the following individuals:

- President
- Principal of Academic Affairs
- Principal of Student Affairs
- Director of Campus Ministry
- Director of Enrollment Management
- Associate Director of Enrollment Management
- Athletic Director
- Assistant Athletic Director
- Director of Institutional Advancement
- Marketing Coordinator
- Basketball Coach

These formal interviews took place in-person in the SJA conference room and were recorded via the Voice Memos app on our Macbook Air computer. Recordings were subsequently stored in a password-protected folder on the same computer. Individual interviews were capped at 45 minutes apiece and were each conducted by both of us. Before beginning the interviews, we assured interviewees of confidentiality and verified that our work was intended to be exploratory and constructive. Interviews were ultimately transcribed via otter.ai.

We conducted focus groups with the following sets of individuals:

- Current SJA coaches (tennis, field hockey, volleyball, lacrosse, softball)
- SJA alumnae who played sports in high school (two who graduated in the 1990s; one who graduated in the 2000s; and one who graduated in the 2010s)
- Current SJA student-athletes (soccer, tennis, volleyball, dance, field hockey)
- Parents of current SJA student-athletes (four individuals)

The student-athlete focus group took place in-person in the SJA conference room and was recorded via the Voice Memos app on our Macbook Air computer. Recording was subsequently stored in a password-protected folder on the same computer. Focus groups with the coaches, alumnae, and parents were conducted via Zoom (during the hours in which we were on campus); these were recorded via Zoom on our Macbook Air computer and subsequently stored in a password-protected folder on that computer. All recordings were ultimately transcribed via otter.ai. Norms for these focus groups included the directives that all participants had a right to speak openly about their perspectives; that participants had the right to speak without interruption or judgment from interviewers or fellow participants; that identities would remain confidentiality to protect the authenticity of the conversation; that interviewers would guide topics and discussions, but that participants could dictate and determine the flow of these conversations (Billups, 2021). These focus groups were capped at one hour apiece. We both facilitated each focus group.

Our document analysis included the following materials and collection processes:

- Examination and classification of the school’s Facebook and Instagram pages, beginning in November 2022 and concluding in February 2023. We classified social media posts based on: a) whether or not the post had to do with athletics; and b) if it was related to athletics, whether it took the form of a scheduling announcement; celebration of an outcome; highlighting of a current team or athlete; or highlighting of an alumna.
- External-facing documents made available to us by the school principals during our on-site visit in April 2023: admissions brochures from 2021 and 2022; “Planned Giving” document from 2022; development flier from 2022; “SJA At-a-Glance” school profile from 2022; the *Wings* alumnae magazine from both 2017-18 and 2021-22.
- Internal documents sent to us by the office of the school president after our on-site visit in April 2023: the new strategic plan generated following school leadership meetings at the end of April 2023.

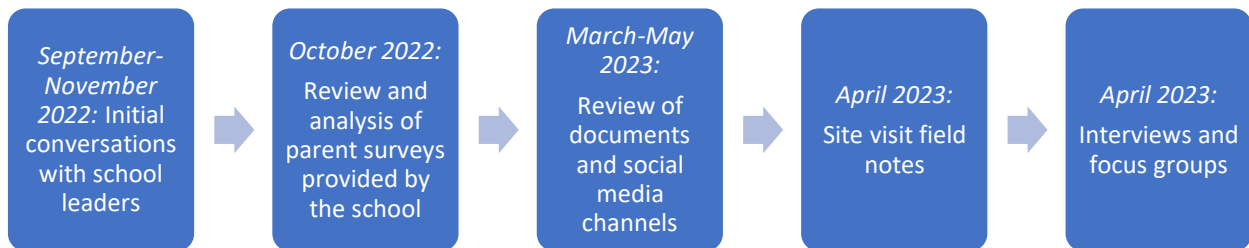
Moreover, we generated field notes (Appendix C) while on-site at the school, which focused on the athletic-specific narratives present in the design and decor of the campus itself, as well as observations made about individual interviews and focus groups. Deggs and Hernandez stress the importance of this manner of triangulation as a critical strategy for data validation, arguing for the importance of robust, in-depth field notes as a means of implementing said process within a qualitative research project like our own (2018). We view the notes from our two-day site visit as a record of the actions and activities we observed, as well as the

conversations we participated in while on-site; this step allowed us the opportunity for inferential reflection in addition to our other analytical steps (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018).

The data collection process aligned with what he had planned; we were pleased with how many school stakeholders we were able to speak to, and that leadership was generous in providing us with other materials. The fact that we were able to visit the site in-person allowed for a far more comprehensive understanding of certain school dynamics, as captured in our field notes.

Figure 2

Timeline of Data Collection



Participants and Sampling

This study utilized non-probability snowball sampling/chain referral in order to recruit participants. Given the nature of our relationship with the organization, we were primarily dependent on key stakeholders to extend the offers of participation on our behalf. The major challenge faced during the data collection process, then, was sampling bias, particularly with regard to the participants of our focus group. Key stakeholders involved in the athletics program

– namely, the Principal of Student Affairs and her future replacement – were our liaisons in setting up the discussions with student-athletes, parents of current student-athletes, athletic alumnae, and current coaches. As such, we believe that many of these individuals were selected under the belief that their responses would be generally favorable to the athletics program, offering us perhaps only a limited set of perspectives on its current status.

Data Analysis

Interview/Focus Group Analysis

After transcribing our interviews via otter.ai, we began the process of developing a codebook for analysis in late April 2023. We used what was primarily an inductive coding process to analyze our data; first, we read through our transcripts, and other documents, individually, looking for meanings and patterns. We each created an initial set of codes, and then went through the reading process again using the preliminary codes; after doing individual coding a second time, we came together in early May 2023 to synthesize our respective codes into a set of seven (*see below*) that best represented all that we had individually documented.

In seeking inter-rater reliability, our goal was that these steps could enhance our process of interpretation (McDonald, et al., 2019). We took up the stance that agreement on the codes used in our transcript analysis signaled “confirmation that the measurements are consistent;” in the instances of disparate individual codes, our divergence was able to “prompt more reflection that ultimately result[ed] in a stronger codebook and coding process” (McDonald, et al., 2019, pp. 15-16).

Initially coding the transcripts separately offered us a helpful approach in our efforts to achieve both reliability and validity in our codes and yield intercoder agreement (MacQueen, et

al., 2007). We were able to turn the five codes we each individually brought back to the discussion into seven agreed-upon codes that we think effectively captured our respective perspectives on the data. Per the guidance of MacQueen, et al., we were able to ensure that all inconsistencies were “noted, discussed, and resolved” before determining the conclusive set of codes (2007).

Table 3

Codebook

<u>CODE</u>	<u>DEFINITION</u>	<u>PURPOSE</u>	<u>ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATIONS</u>
Collaboration (blue)	References to areas or opportunities for potential collaboration across school domains	Illuminate shared or disparate narratives, & reveal opportunities for strategic work (PQs 1,3)	"It would be really nice to do some high-level brainstorming together with other departments."
Communication (green)	References to strategies, practices, or trends (or lack thereof) in the way the school communicates about athletics, internally or externally	Reveal stakeholder perspectives on existing practices and guide discussion on future strategic opportunities (PQs 1,2,3)	"But it's almost like we were hiding athletics from the presentation...because we were trying to change the narrative that that's all we were."
Competition (red)	References to the contexts or ways in which school domains compete against one another	Unveil potential areas of conflict amongst school domains, which could inhibit optimized school outcomes vis a vis athletics (PQs 1,2,3)	"For whatever reason, there is a divide between athletics and the faculty."
Relationships (orange)	References to existing or aspirational connections between different stakeholder groups (or lack thereof)	Further understand the existing connections across athletic stakeholder groups (PQs 1,2)	"How can I get better? How can I help you? How can I help the programs to, you know, be there for the coaches?"
History (purple)	References to past successes of SJA athletics, as a standalone topic or with relativity to the contemporary program	Suggest degrees of importance of this topic to different stakeholders, and inform consideration of future strategic choices that do or don't incorporate historical success (PQs 1,2,3)	"We've been blessed to be very competitive for decades and attract great athletes to SJA."
Identity (gray)	References to any connections between SJA athletics and the school's larger brand identity	Understand the degree to which stakeholders use SJA athletics to inform overall sense of the school's identity (PQs 1,2,3)	"So many things over the years have stigmatized us as the 'jock school.'"
Innovation (yellow)	References to the ways that the SJA athletics engages in innovative strategies or practices (or doesn't)	Analyze how SJA athletics thinks and acts innovatively, and consider future recs (PQs 2,3)	"If we don't ask ourselves how we can get better, we're going to get passed up."

One of the emergent themes in the analysis of our coded transcripts was that many stakeholders, both internal and external, advocated for the school to act more **innovatively**; specifically, stakeholders advocated for the school to upgrade its athletic facilities and re-think its coaching salary structure, all in service of broader school objectives such as enrollment and athletic success. Multiple coaches expressed to us that they are aware that they make less money coaching at SJA than they would in St. Louis public school districts, or even at competitor private schools. Given the school's **history** of athletic success, we found this to be a surprising theme that the school could respond to more strategically.

Enhanced professional development for coaches was suggested both by parents (in the focus group we facilitated and in end-of-season surveys provided to us by the school) and school employees. Investment in such an initiative could offer SEL training to coaches, as well as provide opportunities for all SJA coaches to understand scaffolded vertical objectives across athletic levels. These kinds of growth opportunities would likely increase the quality of the **relationships** amongst stakeholders in and around the athletics program, as well as equip coaches to more effectively **communicate** to parents and students.

Both school employees and parents addressed the opportunity for increased pathways for the athletics program to **collaborate** with parents, specifically with regard to leveraging parent involvement to assist with athletics-focused admissions and athletics-focused advancement. Leveraging the time and talents of parents within the program could be an effective way of the athletics program acting more strategically in the interest of other school outcomes without placing undue additional burdens on current employees. Bringing in additional stakeholder voices could also aid in mitigating some of the inherently **competitive** feelings amongst the different school domains, and compel them to work more closely together.

Multiple stakeholders advocated for the school to take further advantage of relationships with local club sports programs in the St. Louis area, specifically those that serve the K-8 grade levels. These relationships would allow SJA to maintain a visible, consistent athletic presence in the St. Louis community, one that would allow the school to sustain its **identity** of athletic success in addition to achieving desired institutional objectives in other domains.

Survey Analysis (see Appendix A)

One of the earliest data points that emerged from our analysis of the parent surveys provided to us by the school was that the parent population still holds the SJA athletics program in high esteem. In the 2022 survey, parents were asked how they felt SJA compared, in eight categories, to other schools they were considering. Among the eight categories (Academic Rigor; AP/ACC Curriculum; Sense of Community; Extra-Curricular Opportunities; Spiritual Growth/Campus Ministry; Athletics; Global Education Program; Other), Athletics had the highest percentage of respondents – 61.67% -- say that they felt SJA’s offering was “Superior” to the other schools in consideration (“Superior” was the highest designation available). One takeaway here for us is that a healthy majority of the current parent population still views SJA as the aspirational athletic school. As much as school leaders, including the athletic director herself, told us in interviews that the school is focused on being academics-first, it was notable to us that only 37.1% of parent respondents found SJA’s Academics to be “Superior” to its competitors.

As part of each of the last three years of surveys provided to us, SJA has asked parents about the degree to which their expectations have been met by the athletics program. In 2020, 17.34% of the 173 respondents said the program had “exceeded expectations,” while 17.92% said that the program “did not meet expectations” – 50.87% said the program “met

expectations.” In 2021, only 15.35% of 228 respondents said that the athletics program had exceeded expectations, while 17.54% said that the program did not meet their expectations, and 53.07% said that the program had met expectations. Most recently, in 2022, 16.42% of 201 parent respondents said that the athletics program exceeded their expectations, but 26.87% said that the program did not meet their expectations, and only 39.80% said that their expectations were met. While we acknowledge that those changes could be a one-year blip of sorts, we believe that a multi-year trend of parent expectations not being met at a rate equal to or higher than the rate of their expectations being exceeded is a troubling one for a school that enjoys such a rich history of athletic success and is still seen as superior to its rivals in this area. These results, coupled with data from interviews with school leaders described above, validate our belief that there are opportunities for the school to consider ways to expand and/or enhance its athletic offerings.

Table 4

Document Analysis

Document Type	Mode of Collection/Analysis	Mentions of Athletics	Affiliated Codes
Admissions brochures from 2021 and 2022	Made available for us to look over during our on-site visit in April 2023	Evidence of the strategy-driven “balanced approach” – approximately equal weight given to academics, arts, and athletics in terms of content and images	Identity Communication

<p>Planned Giving document from 2022</p>	<p>Made available for us to look over during our on-site visit in April 2023</p>	<p>Not a single mention of athletics in the document; religious imagery on the cover and featured within</p>	<p>Collaboration Identity Innovation Communication</p>
<p>Development flier from 2022</p>	<p>Made available for us to look over during our on-site visit in April 2023</p>	<p>Not a single mention of athletics in the flier</p>	<p>History Relationships Identity Innovation Communication</p>
<p>“SJA At-a-Glance” school profile document</p>	<p>Made available for us to look over during our on-site visit in April 2023</p>	<p>Solely features academics; traditional choice for this sort of school document, but perhaps a missed opportunity to feature athletics as a key component of the school community and culture</p>	<p>Identity History Competition Communication</p>
<p>Copies of <i>Wings</i> alumnae/community magazine, from 2017-18 and 2021-22</p>	<p>Made available for us to look over during our on-site visit in April 2023</p>	<p>While the more recent edition features statistics on state championships and college matriculations, there are no features or highlights on any specific athletic alumnae</p>	<p>Identity History Communication</p>

<p>Copy of school strategic plan, generated in late April 2023</p>	<p>Made available to us digitally following our on-site visit in April 2023</p>	<p>Not a single mention of athletics in any of the proposed and agreed-upon initiatives for the coming year</p>	<p>Collaboration Communication Innovation Identity Relationships</p>
<p>School’s Facebook and Instagram feeds</p>	<p>Tracked and classified from November 2022 through February 2023</p>	<p>We calculated that 7% of posts from this stretch featured athletics, and a majority of those were of a single group (dance). This seems low given the prestige of the program.</p>	<p>Competition Identity Relationships History Communication</p>

In conducting document and secondary data analysis, we charted the proportion of web content related to athletics, and the positioning and messaging thereof. We tracked both the quantity and the types of posts on school social media channels from November 2022 to February 2023 that pertained to athletics, noting that only 7% of the posts in that time frame referred to athletics, and only a small handful of those were anything beyond announcing game schedules. We read over parent and student survey results provided to us by the school, identifying via a coded analysis that much of the negative feedback present in these surveys focused on innovation (a lack of new team opportunities or facility upgrades); communication (varying degrees of misunderstanding or inaccessibility among parents, athletes, and coaches); and relationships (athletes feeling alienated by teammates or coaches due to misaligned priorities or differing visions for what the program should look like). Although we acknowledge the likelihood that survey feedback stems from the unhappiest subset of the SJA population, the

respondents are representative of critical stakeholder groups of whose perspectives school leadership is certainly responsible for managing.

Moreover, we analyzed the placement of athletics-related content in external-facing school communication materials. Multiple school brochures covering the last two school years, provided to us by the marketing and development offices, featured not a single mention of athletics, suggesting to us a series of missed opportunities for leveraging the success of that program, both past and present, in the interests of those other institutional domains. Similarly, the most recent strategic plan, generated in April 2023 and provided to us by school administration, did not feature a single mention of athletics. The consistency in omission of athletics content appears to hinder the school's ability to strategically incorporate that key program into the re-creation of narratives critical to the crystallization of organizational identity.

Site Visit Field Notes (Appendix C)

Our site visit field notes focused on the visible indicators of SJA athletics' presence on campus, and the tangible role it appears to play in the school's identity. Much of our memo-ing, both before and after the site visit, hinged on the political nature of the relationships among school leaders. Specifically, many of our pre-visit conversations, conducted with school leaders over Zoom, centered on the effectiveness of the current athletic director, as well as the factionalism evident within school administration regarding whether or not there needed to be wholesale changes made to the athletic department.

In elucidating both the findings and recommendations detailed below, we have considered as context the role of both the physical layout and design of the campus (with specific respect to athletics), and the politics of interpersonal relationships at the school leadership level.

Research Findings

Seven primary findings emerged from our research, with overlapping connections to our Project Questions (reproduced for reference).

PQ 1: What are the current perspectives of SJA athletics among stakeholders, and what affiliated narratives stem from those perspectives?

PQ 2: In what ways does SJA communicate about its athletic program to its stakeholders and broader St. Louis community, and what is the content of those communications?

PQ 3: How can SJA strategically communicate codified narratives around athletics that benefit institutional enrollment and development?

Finding 1 (PQs 1,2): There are noticeable gaps in communication between the athletics department and stakeholders in the enrollment office, advancement office, and communications offices.

Throughout interviews of faculty and leaders of the communications, development, enrollment, and academic arms of the school, many noted the lack of communication between the athletic department and their particular domain of focus. Some noted a lack of interest from the athletic department in collaborating, while others mentioned systems issues that prevent collaboration. There is a sense from the interviews that collaboration between athletics and other domains could elevate strategic thinking on the part of athletics.

When asked about collaborating with the athletic department, one interviewee said:

There's not a lot of collaboration in that department, because I think there's fear. It's a conservative approach. Selfishly, I want more collaboration with athletics and admissions. I think that that's been a little bit of an issue and is kind of that old school mindset in athletics.

During an interview with an administrator connected to the enrollment at SJA, we were struck by a statement that clearly shows the gap in communication and connection. The last line in the quote below really shows the lack of communication between athletics and enrollment.

Just think about how integral coaches can be. Obviously, teachers are insanely important and impactful, but so are coaches. I don't even know any of the coaches' names.

In our document analysis, we explored flyers and publications that were central to work of the enrollment and fundraising offices. A fundraising flyer in particular stood out. It was intended to be a comprehensive snapshot of SJA; however, it excluded any mention of athletics. It contained a focus on coding, faith, Junior year traditions, and fine arts.

Finding 2 (PQs 1,3): The stakeholders in the enrollment, advancement, and communications offices desire systemic strategic collaboration with the athletic department to codify narratives that strengthen admissions, fundraising, and athletics.

An extension of Finding #1, the acknowledgement of a communication gap, leads to Finding #2 which focuses on the strategic advantages of collaborating that strengthen the entire

organization. The need for collaboration is not only about improving athletics, but also about elevating other domains as well. During an interview with a member in the development office, the interviewee noted:

I think there's a lot of opportunity within alumnae engagement to celebrate reunions of state championships. But that has been difficult to achieve because the collaboration piece doesn't seem to quite be there. I know about athletic issues on an as needed basis. So for example, if parents are concerned, I hear about it, and I can feel it through the fundraising, if there's a concern. Then I have to go back and be like, Wow, I'm hearing a lot of complaints. I think advancement does need to be aware, so we don't walk in a landmine.

An academic leader at SJA was asked about the idea of collaboration and the potential outcomes of that collaboration. The interviewee noted:

I do think that the athletic department itself could use some strategic thinking. Who do we want to be? How do we continue to lift ourselves up? And what does that look like? I'm always like, what about this? Or what about this? Or have you thought about that? However, that can drive people crazy, especially the people who respond, "this is how we do it." It would be really nice to do some high-level brainstorming with athletics, admissions, and development.

Our media analysis showed very little mention of athletics. The analysis spanned five months and captured the website, Facebook, and Instagram. Only 7% of postings were athletic related. A media footprint of that size, in comparison to the other postings, did not show a clear narrative about athletics.

Finding 3 (PQ 1): Internal (school administration, communications, enrollment, and advancement) and external (parents, alumnae, and prospective families) stakeholders believe that the athletics department is lagging in terms of its marketing and communications about current athletics programs and the development of new initiatives and cohesive institutional narratives.

Communication from the athletics department to internal stakeholders is mostly done through Coaches and their use of Instagram, as well as a weekly email. Through our interviews, we learned that some coaches are excellent with these types of communication, while others struggle. For those who struggle, some give the communication job to a team captain. This leads to inconsistency and communication that lacks a strategic vision and plan. One interviewee associated with communications noted:

If there's a team that isn't posting or that isn't being representative, I try and figure out if there is a student? Is there a team manager? Is there an assistant coach? Is there a parent that's at every game that can send me stuff? And then I'll post that. So we have a couple of sports that are a little like, whatever, I don't want to, and those are underrepresented.

After being asked about how the Athletic Director collaborates with the communications department, the interviewee shared the quote below, which further shows the lack of intentional strategy to communicate to stakeholders:

If the Athletic Director has something, she'll come and see me. We don't regularly meet or anything.

The media analysis uncovered a disjointed approach to storytelling through media channels. The majority of the postings were photos from what appeared to be random choices of sports. For example, during the winter season, swimming and dance were featured far more than basketball, but a narrative did not appear to emerge. Historically, basketball has been a highly successful sport, but very few postings related to basketball in the five-month span of analysis. Furthermore, there were no postings that showed any collaboration between athletics, enrollment, fundraising, or other academic departments.

Finding 4 (PQs 1,2,3): Both internal (employees and students) and external (parents and alumnae) stakeholders advocate for more innovative and strategic approaches that impact skill development in all athletes, deepen their partnerships with SJA stakeholders; and contribute to long-term sustainability in enrollment and fundraising.

Throughout interviews and focus groups, we heard feedback and concerns that the athletic program was not evolving and growing. There were statements of concern that the local high schools were trying new approaches and strategies to elevate their athletic programs and

institutions, but SJA was not. For many years, SJA was the preeminent athletic program in St. Louis. Our interviews uncovered perceptions and concern that local schools were closing the gap and potentially even surpassing SJA in particular sports. Coupled with that concern was often a statement about SJA's reliance on how the department operated long ago, and perceived reluctance to be more innovative.

One interviewee told us:

I think there's a lot of areas of athletics where we could put more energy and resources into ensuring it's a really strong department instead of taking it for granted. I think it's time. Things have just been run the same way for so long. We have to evolve, and we have to be willing to be open and have harder discussions.

Another interviewee from administration told us:

I don't want to say resting on our laurels, but I think that we could be more cutting edge and more innovative. We might be lacking innovation. I think we did so well, for so long, that everybody expects that athletics at St. Joe are the very best that you can find. I feel like we're doing the same thing every year.

A member of the athletic department noted:

I just feel like you can improve everything you do. We should reflect, and we have room for growth. If we don't continue to look at ourselves and examine how we can do better, we could get passed up.

An interviewee connected to enrollment noted:

I think there's a little staleness at St. Joe, I don't think we own the top premier athletic program any longer, for the last ten years. Everybody's good now, because these kids are going into club programs, basketball, baseball, soccer when they're young. So you know, public schools are really good.

The document analysis showed the absence of athletic department impact on major publications. When exploring *Wings*, SJA's annual publication that is sent to all stakeholders, there were very few pictures and notations for athletics. For such a substantial publication, serving a very large number of constituents, one would think that athletics would have played a much larger role in the narratives embedded in the publication.

In the early months of this project, SJA administration provided us with three years of parent survey data related to the athletic program. On numerous occasions, parent feedback was directed at wanting more athletic opportunities/sports, increased opportunities for students who were cut from other teams, and more intentional focus on developing the players on the freshman and JV teams. In general, the parent stakeholder group voiced concern about lack of innovative ideas to evolve with different needs of families, and the athletic landscape in St. Louis.

One parent noted:

I wish there were opportunities to play more sports for those athletes cut but still interested in competing. Pickleball was a great addition and example.

Finding 5 (PQs 2,3): Athletics personnel express divergent narratives regarding the relationship between athletics and academics, which contributes to broader institutional disunity in terms of school identity and the capacity for SJA athletics to more positively contribute to enrollment and development objectives.

During interviews with athletic department personnel and the focus group of coaches, we consistently heard different perceptions about how athletics fits into the larger identity at SJA. During the Coaches Focus Group, there was general consensus that SJA was known locally as a “jock school.” A couple of the coaches were uncomfortable with that perception, but others were perfectly fine with it. All coaches stated how important the athletics department is to the overall identity of the school. One coach stated:

I call it the jock school. The reality is that it's known around at the St. Louis area for its athletics and the success of its athletics. St. Joe is definitely known as a sports school.

A unique comment came from an interview with the Athletic Director. She adamantly stated, “*we're academics first.*” The statement by the leader of the athletic department, shows divergent perspectives even within the department itself.

During an interview with an administrator, she noted:

We have the reputation of being absolutely a sports school.

Another school leader at the school, told us in an interview:

I would say I talk to parents more about athletics than I do academics.

Later in our conversation with the Athletic Director, she shared a statement about her involvement at Admissions Open House events, that shows how important athletics is to prospective families considering SJA.

I'm the busiest person here at the open house.

During an interview with the student-athlete focus group, when asked about SJA's identity in the community, a student responded:

I feel like a lot of people think St Joe's like the sporty school.

All the documents analyzed, gave the appearance that the academic elements of the school were far more significant than the athletic programs' impact on the school, which is in clear contrast to narratives emerging from the interviews and focus groups. The publications and media of SJA appear to be incongruent with the perceptions of the stakeholders we interacted with in this study.

Our field notes from the site visit, reveal our perceptions of the athletics facilities on campus. In general, we were underwhelmed with the athletics facilities, in comparison to the rest

of campus. This is significant to this finding because the campus appearance and state of the facilities contribute to the narratives surrounding the relationship, and possible disunity, between academics and athletics.

Finding 6 (PQs 1,2): Current SJA administrators' desire for a school identity narrative that more equally promotes *both* athletics and academics has resulted in diminishing storytelling content around SJA athletics, which mitigates the capacity for athletic narratives to benefit institutional enrollment and development.

This finding was largely established through our field notes, document analysis, and media analysis. As we examined enrollment and fundraising publications that portray the most important elements of SJA, they were often void of athletic data, celebrations, and visuals. A reaction from our research team was that if the viewer of these publications did not know anything about SJA, they would never have thought athletics was a significant component to their identity. After looking through each Facebook and Instagram posting over the course of five months, only 7% of the posts were athletic related. An important document provided to us by the school, was a recent draft of the school's strategic plan. Surprisingly, it did not contain any mention of athletics.

Through interviews, we learned that the school has made an intentional decision to promote and communicate in a way that displays a balanced approach to education at SJA. However, in those conversations, several interviews uncovered the perspective that the school overcorrected in their attempt to portray balance, and are omitting critical opportunities to celebrate and highlight SJA athletics. An example was shared about the omission of athletics at two events pertaining to enrollment and development:

Admissions did a presentation to incoming parents and the presenter didn't mention one line about athletics. She omitted that we had excellent sports teams. I was surprised by that. I've noticed that even talking points for a development event in Florida, the speaker forgot to mention that the historic basketball coach was there in the audience.

Whether or not those omissions were accidental or intentional at the two events, they certainly contribute to the diminishing storytelling about athletics, which impacts how stakeholders perceive the state of athletics at SJA.

Field notes from the on-site visit showed a more balanced narrative between athletics and academics. Pictures on the walls, trophies, plaques, logos, school spirit elements, dedications of spaces, etc, created a sense of balance. This lack of congruency between our field notes and the interviews and focus groups might be contributing to inconsistent narratives.

Finding 7 (PQs 2,3): SJA's current communication about athletics is disaggregated and omits strategically significant narratives, signaling the lack of an integrated communications strategy.

This finding is a result of interview and focus group content that showed a lack of institutional commitment to a strategy that builds a cohesive narrative about SJA's athletic program. As our literature review uncovered, when communication is effectively executed, relationships flourish and trust increases. Two key indicators of organizational loyalty are trust and happiness (Aksoy, et al., 2015). Schools that are successful at implementing strategies that

enhance both are far more likely to experience productive, long-term loyalty behaviors across stakeholder groups.

Parents, the study concluded, prefer more personalized communication. This difference in preference of communication can lead to misunderstandings, misperceptions, and disjointed narratives about student experiences (Halsey). Such feelings can negatively impact relationships, leading to lower parent satisfaction and a decrease in loyalty behaviors.

During an interview with an academic leader, after being asked about communication between the school and internal and external audiences, she replied:

There are things in communication that we could do better. Last weekend there was a game scheduled here, and then it got moved because of the rain but parents didn't know. I think it could be communicated better. It could definitely be better, like today for the National Letter of Intent signing. We could have made a bigger deal about it. Rather than just a little ceremony we could have promoted it and had a large ceremony.

During the Parent Focus Group, one parent told us:

Depending on the sport, communication can be a problem. I know they're trying to teach the girls to be responsible, and they want to deal with them first, but sometimes it would, as a parent, be nice to be in the loop on certain things.

The media analysis did not uncover clear strategic actions to communicate a particular narrative about athletics. The analysis did not identify a clear strategy to communicate with stakeholders, like parents or alumnae. The analysis did contribute to our perception that there is a lack of strategic implementation.

Recommendations

Based on our conceptual framework, blending stakeholder and narrative theories, here are the recommendations presented to SJA in service of the findings described above. Affiliated findings are noted for each recommendation.

Recommendation #1 (findings 1,2): We recommend a system or process that necessitates a consistent meeting of these domains. We recommend a monthly meeting of admissions, athletics, and development. This should be part of the job description for the AD. The job of the AD must further entail consistent, strategic collaboration with other domains at SJA, aimed at benefiting admission, athletics, and development. Moreover, research into narrative theory imparts the need for organizational leaders to be on the same page in the generation or institutional storytelling (Chreim, 2005). The more consistent the intentional interactions among athletics and other domains, the more strategic the school will be able to be in the creation of the athletics-focused narratives it wants to leverage.

Currently, the athletics program falls under the jurisdiction of the Principal of Student Affairs, a role that also oversees other school arenas. We believe that decisions involving SJA athletics could be made more strategically if the program was more directly and exclusively represented in collaborative meetings. Embedded in this recommendation is an opportunity for

school leadership to rethink some of the core roles that an Athletic Director executes on a daily basis. The skills needed for strategic collaboration should be emphasized in the Athletic Directors job description and list of primary responsibilities. This monthly meeting has the potential to elevate athletic, enrollment, development, and communication efforts.

Recommendation #2 (finding 3): We recommend utilizing the assistant athletic director (a recently-created role) in a way that more firmly establishes a link between athletics and the communications department for the school.

Currently, the athletics program relies on its individual coaches – who, in turn, assign the role to individual players – to communicate to parents and other stakeholders about team information and content. We believe that a more centralized, strategic approach from the top-down will increase both the quantity and quality of communications and stories that emerge from athletics. Throughout interviews, there were numerous comments about the talent and capacity of the Assistant Athletic Director. This recommendation offers the Assistant AD opportunities to have a broader impact on the department and organization. The consistent sharing of stories and narratives can be an important component of what Brown refers to as narratives being in “a perpetual state of becoming” (2006). With this systematic method to enhance communication, SJA has an opportunity to fully recognize key aspects of their identities. Within this framework, we note that an organization like SJA is in a “continuous process of narration,” the very fabric of the organization is constantly being created and re-created through the elaboration. By centralizing this link between athletics and communication, the identity of athletics within SJA, can become clearer to stakeholders. Embedded in this recommendation are the reminders by Frisby’s study regarding meaningful messages. Former teachers, former coaches, or

administration are all positioned to send “meaningful messages,” which can have a significant impact on alumnae and lead to stronger feelings of identity and place within the current school environment; that increased sense of identity can lead to long-term engagement with the school (Frisby, et al., 2019). This recommendation positions the Assistant Athletic Director to facilitate meaningful messages from coaches.

Recommendation #3 (finding 4): We recommend the design of a systematic think tank/collaboration of stakeholders (Athletic Director, faculty, coach, administrator, parent, alumnae) to analyze current practices; continuously acquires stakeholder feedback; research concepts used at other institutions or through evidence-based programs; and produce plans and priorities to be executed over established time frames. We believe that such a model allows school leaders to consistently and meaningfully empower diverse stakeholder voices in significant change initiatives, per the suggestions of the literature (Friedman & Miles, 2002).

Similar to Recommendation #1, there is an opportunity to embed the skills needed to lead and execute this think tank into the core responsibilities of the Athletic Director. This systems recommendation offers the school an opportunity to be in a constant state of reflection and growth. From a logistical standpoint, we suggest that this group exists on a two-year cycle: by the second semester of the first year, they should have a handful of proposed objectives to pitch to the school’s board. Board signoff would then give the think tank until the end of its second year to research, analyze, and design a final proposal for the approved initiative(s).

Recommendation #4 (finding 5): We recommend that SJA design a “Portrait of an Athlete” to support the internal community and how the community views athletics at SJA. We suggest

using the existing “Portrait of an Angel” framework employed by the academic arm of the school to build a comparable vision for what an SJA athlete looks like. This recommendation can be a collaborative process that engages internal stakeholders from athletics, admissions, and other school leaders in designing what it means to be an SJA athlete and how an SJA athlete is impacted by the institution.

The “Portrait of an Athlete” campaign would give school leaders direct control over a key institutional narrative (Boje, 1995). An institutional initiative of this sort not only communicates that the school values athletics enough to put this level of intentionality into the program, but also more specifically codifies what it wants to communicate about the nature of being a student-athlete at SJA. Consequently, this portrait can be used across marketing materials such as brochures and social media and can be a valuable talking point for the admissions department in conversations with prospective families.

Recommendation #5 (findings 6,7): There is a significant need to be more aggressive in external communications regarding athletics. Given that recent strategic plans featured no mention of athletics, we recommend that, going forward, marketing and communication around the program be seen as an ongoing strategic initiative. Explicit inclusion in strategic plans that come directly from school leadership can more clearly codify the narratives that school wants to present about its athletic program. The words “aggressive” and “strategic” are critical in this recommendation. The omissions of athletics in publications and on social media should be corrected through the development of a strategic communications approach that internal stakeholders (coaches, athletic department, and administration) are keenly aware of so they can reinforce messaging.

Inclusion of explicit initiatives for athletics communications in a schoolwide strategic plan can help cohere the narratives emerging from the institution, and more clearly codify what the expectations are for communicating about athletics across domains. We believe that this kind of clear, direct, top-down initiative also offers opportunities for stronger accountability in ensuring that narratives generated internally – both formal and informal – align with institutional objectives.

Discussion

Study Limitations

We are aware that the study has some limitations that should be taken into account. From our early conversations with two lead administrators, there seemed to be concern about what our purpose was in this project. We got the impression that there was worry that we were only there to uncover weaknesses, and that our presence was more of a threat than a help. This was not shared directly with us, but our perception of this grew as conversations continued prior to our site visit. As our site visit approached, we relied on those two administrators to set up the participants in the focus groups of parents, coaches, alumnae, and interviews with various members of the administration and faculty. The coaches, parents, and alumnae focus groups seemed to be mostly comprised of people who felt positively about the athletic department. The focus group participants' answers contrasted with many of the administrators' perceptions revealed in the interviews. Also contributing to this perception was recognizing who was *not* in the focus groups. As our field notes indicate, there were numerous interviewees that mentioned their surprise that we were not interviewing particular members of the community. For example, the long-time and historically-successful basketball coach was not asked to be in the coaches

group. That seemed odd to us, and odd to a few of our administrative interviewees when they inquired about who was in that particular focus group. Another omission was not having the assistant athletic director on our list of people to interview. This did not appear to be a concern until we were fully engaged in the site visit and we kept hearing how impressive this person is. It certainly was a strange omission because of how important that person appears to be, based on the number of times that administrators mentioned her positive impact. In the case of the basketball coach and the assistant AD, we ended up reaching out to our school contacts after our site visit, to line up the interviews with both of them. In retrospect, we would have benefited from reviewing the list of focus group participants and the list of interview participants with the president of the school prior to our site visit. She likely could have affirmed that the participants would have provided a balanced set of perspectives or encouraged us to reach for more input from different people. Another approach that we have since considered, was having a second site visit and requesting specific people who were named or alluded to in our first site visit. We learned so much in those two days, we could have leveraged that for a second site visit.

Another limitation of the project was how few alumnae and parents we were able to engage with. For such large cohorts of stakeholders, we only spoke to five parents and four alumnae in their respective focus groups. They offered significant insight; however, due to the size of the two groups, we cannot assume that they represent the views and perceptions of the broader parent and alumnae populations. We knew that we wanted to keep our focus groups around ten people, but we hoped for some divergent perspectives within each group to give us broader understandings.

A third limitation to be considered is that we did not hear the same concerns from parents and alumnae that the school President has been receiving from those two stakeholder groups.

This led us to having to rely on secondhand information and insight. Not hearing that same feedback, and the accompanying narratives, directly made those initial discussion points challenging for direct connections to our findings and recommendations. This limitation certainly connects to the aforementioned limitations, and we think a second site visit would have helped us more strategically access broader perspectives, and some that align with what the president was directly hearing.

Implications for Future Investigation

As our project with SJA progressed, we began to realize that our approach to inquiry could be utilized at schools other than SJA, supporting their athletic departments' challenges. Athletic successes and struggles at independent schools – especially those with rich, proud histories -- can be visible, emotional, and high-stakes. High school athletics is unique when compared to academics and the arts, because there are clear quantifiable outcomes. This puts any athletic program, at any school, in a spotlight both within the school community and in their larger local communities. Moreover, school spirit is typically at its peak when connected to positive athletic outcomes. Due to that combination of visibility and emotion being jointly tied to athletics, through generations of students and families, nonetheless, we believe that this inquiry can theoretically help leaders at other schools navigate feedback from their stakeholders in this area.

Our conceptual framework, formed of narrative and stakeholder theories, allows us to consider broader implications and applications beyond athletics. As we consider any organization, managing stakeholder feedback and the narratives that impact an organization is of high importance. The process of this inquiry can be applied to other phenomena across various

industries. No matter the industry, organizational leaders find themselves focusing on capturing and then leveraging narratives that help shape and affirm their identity, always with the hopes of cohesion and codification. To engage with organizational narratives, leaders need accompanying strategic approaches for the management of, and engagement with, key stakeholders. Together, narrative theory and stakeholder theory can help a broad set of organizations leverage strategic narratives to support multiple domains in their organization.

Conclusion

SJA is a special learning community that is positioned to leverage their tradition of athletic excellence with the recommendations in this paper, allowing them to enhance the impact of the athletic community in and of itself, and in service of other school domains. The recommendations that have emerged through this inquiry signal opportunities to rethink institutional systems in the organization and the expectations of various roles at SJA. This inquiry did not seek to pass judgements about individual members or specific departments at SJA. The research methodology allowed us to focus on increased strategic collaboration, clarity on what it means to be an athlete at SJA, how to maximize departmental impact by leveraging different roles, and enhancing expectations regarding strategy and partnership of critical leadership roles. This paper offers SJA recommendations to improve in multiple institutional domains, by rethinking the systems surrounding the athletic department and how athletics collaborates with other school offices.

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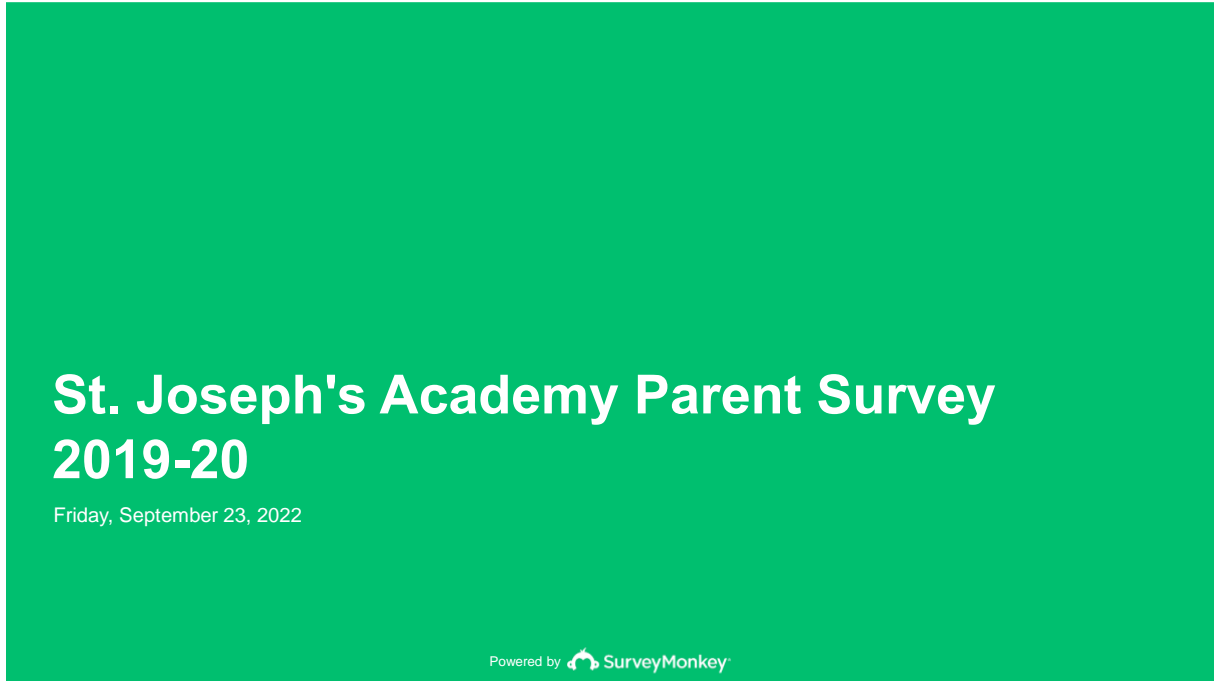
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Appendix A

Excerpts from Parent Surveys provided by SJA



Q38: Athletic opportunities at SJA
 Answered: 173 Skipped: 42

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Exceeded my expectations	17.34%	30
Met my expectations	50.87%	88
Did not meet my expectations	17.92%	31
No contact/not applicable	13.87%	24
TOTAL		173

Powered by SurveyMonkey



St. Joseph's Academy Parent Survey 2020-21

Friday, September 23, 2022

Powered by SurveyMonkey

Q39: Athletic opportunities at SJA

Answered: 228 Skipped: 80

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Exceeded my expectations	15.35%	35
Met my expectations	53.07%	121
Did not meet my expectations	17.54%	40
No contact/not applicable	14.04%	32
TOTAL		228

Powered by SurveyMonkey



St. Joseph's Academy Parent Survey 2021-2022

Wednesday, June 01, 2022

Powered by SurveyMonkey

Q23: Athletic opportunities at SJA

Answered: 201 Skipped: 58

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Exceeded my expectations	16.42%	33
Met my expectations	39.80%	80
Did not meet my expectations	26.87%	54
No contact/not applicable	16.92%	34
TOTAL		201

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Q3: Based upon the schools you visited or considered for your daughter, please let us know how St. Joe compared in the following areas:

Answered: 62 Skipped: 197

St. Joe was:	SUPERIOR	SIMILAR	LESS COMPETITIVE	NO OPINION	TOTAL
Academic Rigor	37.10% 23	61.29% 38	1.61% 1	0.00% 0	62
API/ACC Curriculum	28.81% 17	57.63% 34	0.00% 0	13.56% 8	59
Sense of Community	60.00% 36	33.33% 20	5.00% 3	1.67% 1	60
Extra-Curricular Opportunities	40.00% 24	60.00% 36	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	60
Spiritual Growth/Campus Ministry	21.67% 13	73.33% 44	0.00% 0	5.00% 3	60
Athletics	61.67% 37	31.67% 19	3.33% 2	3.33% 2	60
Global Education Program	20.00% 12	48.33% 29	0.00% 0	31.67% 19	60
Other	13.33% 2	26.67% 4	0.00% 0	60.00% 9	15

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Appendix B

Interview Questions

Interview 1: Marcia Niedringhaus, President

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics program. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? PQ1
2. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well? How did you *find out* that that's something the program does well? How does the school communicate positive narratives like this? PQ 1, PQ 2
3. Which stakeholder groups are most influential in shaping the narrative(s) about the athletic program? How do they do that?
4. Do certain groups of stakeholders clearly have perspectives about SJA athletics that are divergent from other groups? If so, what are your thoughts about this variability?
5. Where or how does the athletics program fit into the larger narratives of SJA To what degree are athletics narratives critical to the core identity of SJA? PQ1,3
6. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? What do you think might account for those differences? PQ1
7. What are the major topics, themes, or storylines around athletics that emerge from *external* stakeholders such as parents, alumnae, other St. Louis residents, et al? What do you communicate to external stakeholders about SJA athletics? PQ1
8. How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? PQ1,2
9. What are some examples of the kinds of perspectives shared and stories told when you have discussions about SJA athletics with colleagues ? PQ1,2
10. Is there anything else that you believe would help us better understand how SJA approaches unified understanding about the role of its athletic program ? And/or, how SJA

utilizes these athletic narratives to impact other school outcomes like admissions, advancement, or brand identity? PQ1,3

Interview 2: Jen Sudekum Principal of Academics

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics program. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? PQ1
2. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well? How did you *find out* that that's something the program does well? PQ1
3. Describe how important you think the St. Joseph's athletic department is to the larger school identity? From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why? PQ1,3
4. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? What do you think might account for those differences? PQ1
5. In your role as Principal, what are the major topics, themes, or storylines around that athletics emerge from non-staff stakeholders (students, parents, alumnae, etc)? To what degree are you involved in communications about athletics back to those groups? PQ1
6. How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? PQ1,2
7. How often is the athletics program discussed with SJA colleagues in your daily work? With whom are you having these conversations? What, in general, is the nature of these discussions? PQ1,2
8. From your specific perspective, is there anything else that you believe would help us better understand how SJA approaches unified understanding about the role of its athletic program on campus? And/or, how SJA utilizes these athletic narratives to impact other school outcomes like admissions, advancement, or brand identity? PQ1,3

Interview 3: Dianne Dunning-Gill, Director of Enrollment Management

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics program. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? PQ1
2. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well? How did you *find out* that that's something the program does well? PQ1
3. Describe how important you think the St. Joseph's athletic department is to the larger school identity? From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why? PQ1,3
4. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? What do you think might account for those differences? PQ1
5. In your role as Admissions Director, what are the major topics, themes, and storylines about athletics that emerge in your conversations with prospective parents and students? To what degree do you feel like you are involved in shaping the narratives around athletics that are communicated to those prospective families?
6. How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? PQ1,2
7. How often is the athletics program discussed with SJA colleagues in your daily work? With whom are you having these conversations? What, in general, is the nature of these discussions? PQ1,2
8. From your specific perspective, is there anything else that you believe would help us better understand how SJA approaches unified understanding about the role of its athletic program on campus? And/or, how SJA utilizes these athletic narratives to impact other school outcomes like admissions, advancement, or brand identity? PQ1,3

Interview 4: Linda Decker, Director of Institutional Advancement

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics program. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? PQ1
2. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well? How did you *find out* that that's something the program does well? PQ1
3. Describe how important you think the St. Joseph's athletic department is to the larger school identity? From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why? PQ1,3
4. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? What do you think might account for those differences? PQ1
5. In your role as Director of Institutional Advancement, what are the major topics, themes, and storylines about athletics that emerge in your conversations with current or prospective donors or partners? To what degree do you feel like you are involved in shaping the narratives around athletics that are communicated to the partnership base?
6. How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? PQ1,2
7. How often is the athletics program discussed with SJA colleagues in your daily work? With whom are you having these conversations? What, in general, is the nature of these discussions? PQ1,2
8. From your specific perspective, is there anything else that you believe would help us better understand how SJA approaches unified understanding about the role of its athletic program on campus? And/or, how SJA utilizes these athletic narratives to impact advancement?

Interview 5: Clare McConnell, Associate Director of Enrollment Management

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics program. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? PQ1

2. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well? How did you *find out* that that's something the program does well? PQ1
3. Describe how important you think the St. Joseph's athletic department is to the larger school identity? From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why? PQ1,3
4. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? What do you think might account for those differences? PQ1
5. In your role as Assistant Admissions Director, what are the major topics, themes, and storylines about athletics that emerge in your conversations with prospective parents and students? To what degree do you feel like you are involved in shaping the narratives around athletics that are communicated to those prospective families?
6. How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? PQ1,2
7. How often is the athletics program discussed with SJA colleagues in your daily work? With whom are you having these conversations? What, in general, is the nature of these discussions? PQ1,2
8. From your specific perspective, is there anything else that you believe would help us better understand how SJA approaches unified understanding about the role of its athletic program on campus? And/or, how SJA utilizes these athletic narratives to impact advancement?

Interview 6: Margie Edwards, Marketing Coordinator

2. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics program. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? PQ1
3. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well? How did you *find out* that that's something the program does well? PQ1

4. Describe how important you think the St. Joseph's athletic department is to the larger school identity? From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why? PQ1,3
5. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? What do you think might account for those differences? PQ1
6. In your role as Admissions Director, what are the major topics, themes, and storylines about athletics that emerge in your conversations with prospective parents and students? To what degree do you feel like you are involved in shaping the narratives around athletics that are communicated to those prospective families?
7. How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? PQ1,2
8. How often is the athletics program discussed with SJA colleagues in your daily work? With whom are you having these conversations? What, in general, is the nature of these discussions? PQ1,2
9. From your specific perspective, is there anything else that you believe would help us better understand how SJA approaches unified understanding about the role of its athletic program on campus? And/or, how SJA utilizes these athletic narratives to impact other school outcomes like admissions, advancement, or brand identity? PQ1,3

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group 1: Athletic Alumnae

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics and meaningful memories you might have. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? (pause for

- responses) How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? (PQ 1,3)
2. Take a moment to reflect back upon the time when you enrolled as a new student at SJA. How influential would you say the athletics program is/was in your decision to enroll at SJA? Why? (PQ 3)
 3. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well and what are some areas the program could improve? Where have you seen or experienced those? (PQ 1)
 4. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? (pause for responses; then follow up question if appropriate)What do you think might account for those differences? (PQ 1,2)
 5. What are the ways in which you continue to keep up with SJA athletics? Do you follow their social media channels? Does the school send out newsletters? (pause for responses) How often do you find yourself consuming stories about SJA athletics? (PQ 2,3)
 6. What are the primary motivating factors that compel you to attend an SJA sporting event as an alumna? If you're a donor, what primary motivating factors compel you to donate? (pause for responses) Are there certain themes, topics, or storylines that are being communicated to you that are aiding in that motivation?
 7. When you discuss your high school sports experiences with alumnae from other institutions, what are some of the narratives that emerge about SJA athletics, relative to other schools. (PQ3)

Focus Group 2: Parents of current student-athletes

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics and meaningful memories you might have. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? (pause for

- responses) How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? (PQ 1,3)
2. Describe how important you think the St. Joseph's athletic program is to the larger school identity? From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why? (PQ 1)
 3. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well and what are some areas the program could improve? Where have you seen or experienced those? (PQ 1)
 4. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? (pause for responses; then follow up question if appropriate)What do you think might account for those differences? (PQ 1,2)
 5. What are the primary motivating factors that compel you to attend an SJA sporting event as an alumna? If you're a donor, what primary motivating factors compel you to donate? (pause for responses) Are there certain themes, topics, or storylines that are being communicated to you that are aiding in that motivation?
 6. When you discuss your SJA high school sports experiences with parents from other institutions, what are some of the narratives that emerge about SJA athletics, relative to other schools. (PQ3)

Focus Group 3: Current coaches

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics and meaningful memories you might have. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? (pause for responses) How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? (PQ 1,3)

2. Describe how important you think the St. Joseph's athletic program is to the larger school identity? From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why? (PQ 1)
3. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well and what are some areas the program could improve? Where have you seen or experienced those? (PQ 1)
4. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? (pause for responses; then follow up question if appropriate) What do you think might account for those differences? (PQ 1,2)
5. What are some of the words or phrases you find yourself most often using when you talk about the athletics program in your professional context? (PQ 1,2,3)
6. What has been communicated to you about what the expectations are of being an SJA coach? From whom did those communications come? How were they delivered?

Focus Group 4: Current student-athletes

1. Take a moment to quietly reflect upon the St. Joseph's athletics and meaningful memories you might have. What are some of the adjectives that come to mind for you? (pause for responses) How would you describe the SJA athletics program to someone who is unfamiliar with it? (PQ 1,3)
2. Describe how important you think the St. Joseph's athletic program is to the larger school identity? From your vantage point, how valuable/meaningful is the athletics program to the school? Why? (PQ 1)
3. What are some of the things that you think the athletics program does well and what are some areas the program could improve? Where have you seen or experienced those? (PQ 1)

4. Amongst your peers in the St. Louis area, how is SJA athletics discussed relative to the athletics program of other schools? How do SJA social media accounts compare to those at other schools in terms of their portrayals of athletes/sports? (PQ 1, 2, 3)
5. Does the current SJA athletics program look any different than how it looked in the past? (pause for responses; then follow up question if appropriate) What do you think might account for those differences? (PQ 1,2)
6. How influential would you say the athletics program is/was in your decision to attend SJA? Why? (PQ 2,3)
7. What are the ways in which you follow athletics happening at SJA? Do you follow their social media channels? Does the school send out newsletters? (pause for responses) How often do you find yourself consuming stories about SJA athletics? (PQ 2,3)

Appendix C

Field Notes

Below are the field notes compiled during our visit to St. Joseph's Academy on April 12-13, 2023.

- Initial observation: “Portrait of an Angel” branding is something that is very important to them – posters everywhere in and around front entrance. No mention of athletics in these first-look materials.
- Alumnae and the history of the school are very important to the school, as evidenced by the décor and design of the interior spaces. There are pictures of alumnae framed along practically every hallway of the school. Clearly this is an aspect/population of the school that they really value – this got us wondering about the extent to which the athletics program might make particular strategic use of this cultural characteristic. They are VERY proud of their roots, going back more than a century.
 - Something else we observed within this theme is the value placed on class rings; after noticing how many of the employees were wearing them, we asked about the rings. They are a critical part of the tradition of the school, and, according to staff, are worn diligently by the majority of SJA alumnae.
 - We also noticed that many of the school leaders we talked to were alumnae themselves, or had daughters who went to the school. Very few high-level employees came to those roles at SJA without some sort of pre-existing connection.

- Notably, given the athletics program’s history and status, we were rather underwhelmed by its facilities. The gymnasium (housing MANY basketball and volleyball banners) was nice but we both described the facility as “dated.” The outdoor facilities even moreso – while there was plenty of space on the property for a softball field, a soccer field, a lacrosse field, and practice areas, there was little else structurally to indicate that this was one of the most dominant scholastic sports programs in the state.
 - Certainly we acknowledge that there is something to be said for the “humble” nature of these facilities, but this DEFINITELY feels like a collaborative opportunity for athletics to work with advancement to generate some interest in facility development. Enrollment would ultimately benefit from this focus as well.
- People were excited to talk with us. Even as we were being introduced to staff members who we would not be interviewing, many implied that they knew about our visit and were excited to have us there.
 - One prevailing sentiment across many of the individual interviews and focus groups was, “Athletics is great, but...” – a handful of individuals actually used this exact phrasing. Our interpretation was that the school was both excited to “show off” its historic program, AND engage with us on how things might be improved...hence the excitement at our presence.
- We heard a lot of the following comment from various interviewees: “Oh I’m surprised that you’re not talking to XX.” This sort of statement was made in reference to multiple coaches, as well as a couple other staff members. As noted earlier in this paper, one limitation of our study was that we were relying on key stakeholders at the school to coordinate our interviews for us. Accordingly, those interview choices were subject to the

preferences of the facilitators and thus POTENTIALLY subject to any sort of political decision-making. These types of comments were really what tipped us off about this being a reality of our circumstances.