

Team Game: Developing a University Course to Facilitate Organizational Network and Mitigate
Role Ambiguity of First-Year Student-Athletes

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Abstract

This paper describes a university course created to improve the college transition of first-year student-athletes (SA) at Southern Utah University (SUU). In order to eliminate confusion about their responsibilities, this course delves into various aspects that affect the SA experience. A primary learning outcome is to improve the organizational network of individuals so that SAs can become more aware of their support staff on campus and where to receive information vital to their success and well-being. After teaching this course for one academic year, student feedback via course evaluations and semester reflection assignments show positive responses to course topics, especially in learning new study skills and how to manage their time better. Additionally, SAs express an improved understanding in SA communication flow and who reach out to if they have questions or concerns. Feedback also suggests that future improvements should look to increase interpersonal experiences for participants.

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Role Ambiguity of First-Year Student-Athletes

Intercollegiate Student-Athletes (SA) are a unique population tasked with many roles and responsibilities. Not only do they compete in their respective sport, they must also concurrently pursue a degree at the institution where they participate. At times, these tasks conflict when one of their responsibilities demands additional attention. If SAs have not prioritized these requirements beforehand, role imbalances are more likely to occur, which may lead to a lack of motivation in completing non-athletic tasks and risking their academic eligibility to compete in their sport (Barger & Seward, 2018).

In order to mitigate role ambiguity, a university course has been developed for first-year SAs to strengthen their network of individuals engaged in helping them be successful while at school. This includes both athletic (coaches, sport psychologist, athletic academic coordinator, etc.) and non-athletic personnel (academic advisor, professors, career and financial aid counselors, etc.). By viewing SA issues through an organizational lens, we can liken the needs of first-year SAs to that of new employees at a company. A certain level of information is required to be taught for new employees to be competent in their position and have a firm understanding of their role(s). By eliminating role ambiguity through proper training (followed by performance feedback), job satisfaction may increase (Jong, 2016). In the case of SAs, teaching a course with the purpose of mitigating role confusion may increase self-efficacy and confidence, while decreasing overall SA anxiety and frustration. Additionally, and more importantly, it will provide SAs early on with a better understanding of their identity and purpose, which may lead them to a more successful transition into post-sport life.

Literature Review

Hereafter, a discussion regarding the functional perspective of organizational communication, specifically Network Theory, will be examined as it relates to the connection between the course and information distribution to the student-athlete (SA). Then, this review will delve into intercollegiate athletic department structure and effectiveness to show how improving the Network Model may benefit SAs. Next, expectations, roles, and responsibilities of the SA will be discussed, as well as other SA-specific issues and how they define the overall college experience. Finally, this review will conclude with an introduction to first-year student issues and pedagogical methods, including high-impact learning practices (HILP), in order to show how incorporating these concepts into the course will theoretically affect the success of its participants.

Functional Perspective of Organizational Communication

Broadly defined, the Functional approach of Organizational Communication is a “way of understanding organizational communication by describing what messages do and how they move through organizations” (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 56). It explains the structure of how communication flows and creates relationships within companies. Information distribution and processing is considered the primary objective within an organizational communication system in this method.

There are three subcategories of message function: organizational, relationship, and change. Organizational functions are "messages that establish the rules and regulations of a particular environment" (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 57). These messages tend to be formatted more formally and distributed to individuals of organizations as such. Examples may include training videos, newsletters, and handbooks. The second message function, relationship function, focuses on communication that helps an individual understand how his/her goals might coincide

with an organization's goals. It can help provide a "sense of belonging" and understanding to how an individual may fit within a company. Change function, the final subcategory, is a method by which messages help organizations adapt over time as policies, rules, and expectations are updated. This type of message function is crucial to the success of the employees of each organization because it provides them with information necessary for them to make appropriate alterations in their work behavior and performance.

The most prevalent model associated with the Functional approach is the Network Model of Organizational Communication, as it examines patterns of interaction within an organization and how these connections culminate into "networks" (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

Network Theory

Networks are "social structures created by communication among individuals and groups" that can be ever-evolving through "links", which are created when a new interaction within an organization is developed (Stohl, 1995, p. 11). According to Monge & Contractor (2001), networks have the potential to control the flow of information, bring people with common interests and backgrounds together, allow for exchanges of resources among participants, enhance social influence, and build common interpretations related to the overall organizational purpose. The central idea is that networks provide a "connectedness" within an organization that extends through personal, group, and even global systems. The level to which a network is connected represents one of its defining characteristics. Other types of characteristics include size, or the volume of participants existing within a network, and centrality. Regarding centrality, a network's goal should be less over more. Therefore, the less decentralized a network is, the greater the channels of information and volume of links that will exist, which equates to greater access and flow of information and ideas (Littlejohn et al., 2017).

As mentioned previously, links are considered the basic unit of organizations and can serve many purposes in a network, including friendships, information sharing, and influence. Farace, Monge, and Russell (1977) identified three properties of links found in organizational networks that help us to understand their effectiveness: symmetry, strength, and reciprocity. Link symmetry is considered the extent to which an equal balance of information sharing is found among participants in an exchange. The greater the balance of information sharing between each individual, the higher the symmetry. Link strength is referred to the level of frequency and length of each interaction. Stronger links have the potential to be more influential on participants, due to the regular occurrence of these interactions taking place. Link reciprocity is defined as the level of agreement to which each participant has about their network links. In order for a link to develop high reciprocity, it is important that any misperceptions regarding interactions be appropriately assessed so that all involved may be in understanding with one another about the terms of said exchanges.

There are two primary types of networks in today's organizations: Formal and Informal, or Emergent. Formal networks consist of structured and often regularly-occurring forms of communication, such as conference presentations and employee training. It is often referred to as top-down, or downward communication, which traditionally is seen as information flow from managers down to employees (Baker, 2002). There are many opinions about whether downward communication is effective. Much of it depends on how an organization uses it with their employees. Morgan and Schieman (1983) surveyed over 30,000 employees and found that the majority felt their company did not do a good job using downward communication. There have been many that have proposed possible solutions to improving this formal network method. Jablin (1980) suggests that upper-level managers should communicate directly with immediate

supervisors so that they can relay information to their employees. This research is a follow-up to findings by Donald Pelz (1952), who found that the most important factor in the connection between leadership style and employee satisfaction was not any specific leadership style at all. Rather, employee satisfaction came from whether the supervisor was given power by management. This power would come via managers communicating to their supervisors about organizational issues and allowing them to relay messages to their employees. In turn, this chain of communication showed that employees trusted their supervisor more when they were perceived as having power. This concept is referred to as the *Pelz Effect*. Additionally, Gibson and Hodgetts (1991) suggested that possibly the most effective method of downward communication, regardless of who is delivering the message, should always be done in the following manner: Communicate verbally, then follow up in writing.

Informal networks, on the other hand, encapsulate all informal types of messaging that occur within an organization, such as in-person conversations, e-mails, and texting. This type of communication may also be referred to as horizontal communication (when two employees are involved) and is often characterized by interpersonal interactions. Like formal methods, informal communication networking can be an effective strategy for distributing information within a company when used correctly and should work in harmony with formal networks. In previous decades, informal communication was often seen by organizations as a hindrance to formal communication. D'Aprix (1996) developed a model that helps to visualize why potential issues may come about in organizations between both types of communication, which he referred to as the *SAY/DO Matrix*. When actions of management match what they say they will do, positive organizational culture and climate are high and both informal and formal communication tend to align and bolster one another. In contrast, a company is more likely to have conflicts between

formal and informal methods when they say one thing and do something else, often leading to poor organizational culture and climate and differing attitudes present between supervisor-employee and employee-employee interactions. As time goes on and organizations evolve, the differences between the two types of communication are becoming less apparent in companies. For example, supervisors may communicate with employees exclusively through e-mail or other technology-mediated channels when providing new information, as opposed to holding group trainings together or creating separate handbooks. Monge and Contractor (2001) stated that “the distinction between formal and informal structures in organizations has diminished significantly in recent years and may become increasingly irrelevant in the coming decade. Reasons for this center on shifts in organizational structure and management philosophy” (p. 471).

Regardless of what the future holds for both formal and informal network types, it is important to note the necessary role that interpersonal experiences play within an organization. Networks utilized should focus on building these interpersonal relationships at every level, as they have shown to positively influence the overall perception and attitude that individuals have about where they work and the role they have there (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015).

Intercollegiate Sport Organization Structure and Effectiveness

Slack (1997) describes a sport organization as a “social entity involved in the sport industry; it is goal-directed, with a consciously structured activity system and a relatively identifiable boundary” (p. 5). Sport organizations occur in many different settings. Gomez, Opazo, and Marti (2008) state that there are three classifications of sport organizations: sport governing bodies, sport providing entities, and sport spectacle organizations. This review will focus on college and university athletic departments, which fall under the sport providing entity classification. This type of organization primarily strives to “design and offer sport activities...

oriented towards official competitions in order to achieve sporting success and social integration” (Gomez et al., 2008, p.5). Its structure is rooted in Weber’s findings on organizational analysis (1947) that emphasized the importance of explicit rules and division of labor for optimal results. Each department is led by an athletic director (AD), who oversees all administrative responsibilities and facilitates departmental goals and objectives. The AD will work alongside Associate and Assistant Athletic Directors that oversee various sub-departments. Such sub-departments may include areas like operations, development, marketing, compliance, strength and conditioning, and sports medicine. Departments may vary in their overall structure and how responsibilities are divided, but there are common staples that are required for mandatory functioning. For example, all college athletic departments house a group dedicated to the academic affairs of its SAs, often found either within compliance or as its own entity. Due to regulations from sport governing bodies, like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), it is required of each SA to meet certain academic criteria in order to compete in their respective sport (2017). Academic affairs staff members help by conveying important academic-related information to SAs, coaches, and administrators. If information is not adequately relayed to those involved, athletic departments become subject to minor or major sanctions from their respective sport governing body.

Organizational effectiveness within an athletic department may be determined through its emphasis on structural dimensions. According to Cunningham and Rivera (2001), there are three dimensions that create organizational structure: specialization, formalization, and centralization. Specialization is the “extent to which roles are differentiated according to a particular task or purpose” (Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1995, p.142). Formalization deals with the “extent to which rules, procedures, instructions, and communications are written down” (Schminke, Ambrose, &

Cropanzano, 2000, p.296). Finally, Chelladurai (2001, p.210) describes centralization as athletic departments deciding “whether authority to make critical decisions resides in top-level positions (centralized decision-making) or is distributed to lower level positions in the organization (decentralized decision-making)”. Through these three dimensions, Cunningham and Rivera (2001) found that two types of structures can be characterized. The first was referred to as the Simple Structure, which emphasized more centralization with moderate levels of formalization and specialization. The second they referred to as the Enabling Structure, which was focused on decentralization of the decision-making process, coupled with high levels of formalization and specialization. It was determined that although there were differences in athletic achievement between both structures, graduation rates remained the same. At this time, it may be important to note what constitutes a successful athletic department. Chelladurai (2001) found that there are two objectives with which athletic departments are faced. One is developmental-based, which includes educational and citizenship goals for SAs. The other is performance-based, which includes winning, marketability, and reputation for both the athletics program and the institution. Therein lies a potential conflict between these objectives, which many athletic departments must learn to find a balance in order to be effective. This inherent conflict, however, may cause many SAs to question their own roles and responsibilities, as well as how to appropriately find a balance in their identity.

Student-Athlete Expectations, Roles, and Responsibilities

The life of a college student-athlete (SA) differs from that of a traditional student in many ways. The biggest difference may be the inflexible time structure and athletic demands that their sport requires. These factors may potentially cause considerable increases in overall stress and isolate them further from their student peers, as they may be less able to participate in traditional

student activities, such as attending on-campus events, taking part in study groups, and joining non-athletic clubs and organizations (Jolly, 2008). Possibly the most detrimental effect from this outcome may be an imbalance of role and identity development. Adler and Adler (1991) found that many SAs invest so heavily in developing their athletic identity that they fail to take the time to explore their other roles, such as the “student” role. They refer to this as “role domination”. This may also be commonly referred to as “role engulfment”, as discussed previously. This occurs when “persons become caught up in the... role as a result of others relating to them largely in terms of their spoiled identity” (Pfuhl & Henry, 1993, p.168). This concept plays a significant part of SA development and has the ability to completely overtake other areas that would otherwise help in the overall growth of the individual. Giulianotti (2005) refers to Athletics as the “greedy role”, one that will undoubtedly usurp control of the SA’s time and resources. It is possible to improve the balance of developing multiple roles of a SA without negating the progress of athletic achievement. Lally and Kerr (2005) suggest that career counselors and other SA support professionals encourage SAs to realistically look at their athletic career progression, as it was found that meaningful exploration of academic and professional career options began to occur once this understanding took place. This knowledge requires all SA-support personnel to “buy in” to the end goal in order for all actions to be in unison as they assist in constructing a more well-balanced approach.

First-Year College Student Development and Pedagogical Practices

While all students require attention to their specific needs and goals, first-year student cohorts are unique for many reasons. Carter et al. (2010) point out the significance of making retention efforts early in a college student’s tenure to assure completion of a degree. Failure to meet these demands early may result in a decrease in first-year student population percentages. It

has also been found that a student's experience in their first year of college strongly influences their psychological well-being and ultimate pathway to academic success for the remainder of their college career (Allen & Robbins, 2008). The first year is a crucial moment in a student's overall experience and feelings about higher education.

Because first-year student success is seen by many as a multi-dimensional concept, research about this population has revolved around more than academic achievement. Zanden, Dennessen, Cillessen, and Meijer (2018) incorporated three domains into a study on first-year student success: (1) academic success, (2) critical thinking disposition, and (3) social-emotional adjustment to university. Their results indicate that non-academic factors significantly contribute to the overall success of the student and highlight the complexities and difficulties associated with this group. Therefore, it should be noted the importance of taking into consideration academic and non-academic factors when teaching first-year students. With academic achievement, Vereijken, Rijst, Beaufort, Driel, and Dekker (2016) found the importance of integrating research into student learning during their first year. When instructors are able to combine new research with their lecture, first-year students showed higher levels of motivation and competence.

Developing a seminar course exclusively for first-year students is part of High-Impact Learning Practices (HILP). According to Kuh (2008, p.9), "the highest quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies". These courses provide a structure of understanding during this transitional period from high school to college. A variety of methods have been used when designing the actual format of these first-year seminars, which include F2F, online, and hybrid settings. For the

context of this project, the online and hybrid approach will be examined in more detail.

Asynchronous learning, or that which occurs at different times according to the schedules of the students in the course, is a characteristic of online and hybrid learning and is more flexible than synchronous, or real-time, learning. It allows more convenience for the student to choose when they are able to focus on course assignments (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). Online and hybrid settings also allow for learning through modules. In order to avoid “content overload”, modules are an effective approach available on many Learning Management Systems (LMS). These act as instructional containers for the course and allow information to be organized based on topic (Vai & Sosulski, 2016).

Method

Creation of this course will begin with the development of learning outcomes and implementation of objectives. Learning outcomes for the course are as follows:

1. Locate help resources on campus that are beneficial to success in college.
2. Identify a network of individuals that will provide assistance throughout tenure in college.
3. Design individualized learning plan to implement into weekly study routine.
4. Develop tools that will provide a foundation for career/professional development opportunities in the future.

Objectives are created with the instructor in mind (Vai & Sosulski, 2016) in order to maintain consistency and flow through the duration of the course. Objectives will be discussed below under their respective module section.

Once learning outcomes and objectives have been solidified, nine weekly modules will be set up to house said objectives via Canvas Learning Management System (LMS). The modules will be conducted in the following order:

- Module 1: Welcome to SUU
- Module 2: Improve Learning & Study Skills
- Module 3: Get to Know the Campus
- Module 4: Update Your Academic Progress
- Module 5: Know Your Student-Athlete Resources
- Module 6: Prepare for Next Semester Registration
- Module 7: Get Involved
- Module 8: Prepare for Your Future
- Module 9: Reflecting on Your First Semester

The class will be taught over a 16-week period during a traditional academic term at Southern Utah University. It will be taught in a hybrid style, composed of assignments that require SAs to visit various locations on campus, as well as submit work online through Canvas LMS.

Module 1: Welcome to SUU

Module 1 will take place during the first week of the semester. The primary objective is to facilitate an introductory discussion among students that will provide them with a foundation of the course, their peers, and their instructor. Through Canvas LMS, a discussion forum will be created along with a number of prompts for the students to use to become engaged in conversation. Questions may be used that will help others to get to know details about fellow members of the class, and prod SAs to ponder their current status on campus as a first-semester freshmen SA. These may include, but are not limited to: “Which sport do you play?”, “What is

your major?”, “Where are you from?”, “What are your hobbies and interests outside of sports?”, and “What is the biggest challenge you feel that you will need to overcome in your first semester as a college student?” It is important not to further the imbalance of identity SAs may have associated with their sport, as it is likely that an imbalance has already occurred prior to entering college (Comeaux, 2013). Therefore, asking non-sport related questions, as well as sport-specific ones, is ideal during the first week of class. SAs will begin to recognize the importance of utilizing their knowledge and skills in multiple domains to be successful in college.

Module 2: Improve Learning & Study Skills

Module 2 will take place over a two-week period. The primary objectives during this module are to: locate learning resources on campus, understand how these resources can help with classes, and create an individualized weekly study plan to use throughout the semester. During the first week, SAs will locate the following on campus: Writing Center, Tutoring Center, and Speech and Presentation Center. They will be required to upload a photo of them next to each location, as well as identify at least one class in their schedule that might benefit from using services offered. An important aspect of the photo requirement for the assignment is to engage SAs and provide them with an opportunity to know exactly where their help resources are on campus. In the second week of Module 2, SAs will learn about various methods in which they can study for classes. It is common for first-year college freshmen to not be equipped with adequate study skills necessary for college success (Shahidi, Dowlatkhah, Avand, Musavi, & Mohammadi, 2014). Module 2 will attempt to remedy this issue. SAs will be educated on a number of topics, including appropriate note-taking skills, organizing personal study time, and creating a study cycle with each class. Learning about these areas will culminate into an assignment of developing a personal weekly study plan that requires SAs to select days and

times, as well as appropriate study tactics, that work best in their schedule and fit their overall needs and strengths. They are encouraged to incorporate help resources on campus that they learned about previously in this module. This assignment, like many others in this class, is designed for immediate and practical application that can be used through the duration of the semester and, after modifications, the duration of their college tenure.

Module 3: Get To Know The Campus

Like Module 2, Module 3 will occur over a two-week period. The primary objective of this module is to educate SAs of their student support resources on campus so that they can be aware of their location and purpose. Although campus academic help resources are essential for student success, it is crucial that every college student also be aware of additional support resources available to them, given the varying personal challenges they may endure. SAs will first be required to submit contact information for their respective financial aid advisor, as well as submitting an email conversation between them and their counselor. Given the myriad of financially-related questions fielded by academic support staff from students, it is important to include financial aid counselors in the network of each SA. Next, SAs will locate the EDGE Center and take a photo of themselves in front of its offices¹. They will also be required to submit one potential project that they could do to fulfill the EDGE project requirements. It is recommended that they meet with an EDGE mentor to get assistance on ideas for a future project. Seeing as the EDGE project is part of graduation requirements at SUU, this assignment gives SAs a head start on this aspect of their degree.

During the second week of Module 3, SAs will have two assignments. First, they will find the Title IX office on campus and take a photo of themselves in front of their offices. Then,

¹ The EDGE program has been discontinued at Southern Utah University, but played a prominent role in graduation during the development of this course. Future courses will not include EDGE as part of their curriculum.

they will be required to submit a brief summary of at least one of the educational materials found on SUU Title IX's official web site. The second assignment will be to locate Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and submit a photo of themselves in front of the building.

Because CAPS is located further away from SUU's campus center than many other resources, it is important that they are aware of where it is at and how to schedule a consultation, if they feel it is appropriate. Mental health issues among SAs have been steadily increasing for some time now (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005), and it is essential that SAs know how to take necessary steps to help with this challenge.

Module 4: Update Your Academic Progress

This module requires only one assignment and should occur at roughly the one-month mark of the semester. The primary objective is to have SAs meet with each of their professors so that they can get an update on their respective course grade. To fulfill this assignment, SAs are required to print out a document (provided by UNIV 1057 instructor) that has the following information for each class: professor name, current grade, professor signature, additional comments. For SAs taking a course from professors working remotely, they are required to provide an email message from the instructor with an updated grade in that course. After submission of this assignment, grade checks will then be distributed to respective coaches of each sport so that they can be aware of progress (or lack thereof) of their freshmen SAs. This assignment will fulfill many purposes, in addition to providing an updated grade. It will also give SAs an opportunity to personally engage their instructors, which they may not have done up to this point in the semester. It will also hold them accountable with their professors, as well as their coaches, for their performance in the classroom up to this point in the semester.

Module 5: Know Your Student-Athlete Resources

This module will take place over a two-week period. The primary objectives are to encourage SAs to get a better understanding about those working in the Athletics department and how each individual can help them, and to introduce them to their respective athletic academic coordinator (AAC) and the resident sports psychologist (SP). During the first week of Module 5, SAs will be required to fill out a worksheet given to them by the UNIV 1057 instructor about different individuals working in the Athletic Department. They will be required to submit the name, office location, and summary of responsibilities for the following individuals: Athletic Director, Compliance Officer, Sport Supervisor. During the second week, SAs will be required to seek out information about and/or meet with both their respective AAC and SP. During their meeting with the AAC, they should discuss current performance in school, career interests and goals, and academic integrity. By meeting with first-year SAs early and discussing future options, this should ease the inevitable transition into post-SA world. It is also important that school policy regarding academic honesty and misconduct is discussed so that SAs can be made fully aware of expectations and responsibilities. Given the frequency with which academic misconduct is exposed among SAs and athletic departments around the United States each year (Gatman, 2011), this course, in addition to those in positions of relevant authority, should counsel SAs about how to avoid these circumstances and the consequences for such behavior.

The second assignment of this week will be for SAs to identify the resident SP on campus and how they can help them succeed in their sport, school, and life. This assignment can be completed through one of two methods: submitting the name, contact information, and a brief summary of how the SP can benefit them, or by meeting with the SP directly (which the SP should verify their meeting with the UNIV 1057 instructor, assuming that the SA gives permission to disclose such information). Although almost all SAs may benefit from meeting

with a SP regularly, this course does not have the ability to mandate that each SA do so, nor should it. This is a decision that must be made from the SA. Therefore, this course should merely strive to educate about the SP and how they might be helpful to the SA.

Module 6: Prepare for Next Semester Registration

The objective for this section of the course is to ensure that SAs are fully registered for courses next semester. SAs are given priority registration in order to help meet NCAA Academic Eligibility requirements (2017). Therefore, this module coincides with university requirements for SA registration protocol. As of the completion date of this paper, SAs at SUU must take the following steps to enroll in courses for the succeeding semester:

1. Identify major academic advisor on campus and set up appointment to discuss registration. After successfully meeting, the academic advisor will remove the RAC number on the SA's account, allowing them access to registration once priority enrollment period begins.
2. Send schedule to AAC so that verification of fulfilling academic eligibility requirements next semester can be ensured. If schedule is approved, SA can plan to register on commencement date of priority enrollment period. If schedule is not approved, the SA, AAC, and academic advisor must work together to make necessary adjustments to schedule, which meet NCAA policy and respective major requirements needed to graduate.

Given that there are limited number of seats in each class, it is strongly recommended that SAs do not delay in taking care of this task. By integrating this task as an assignment for the course, it should help to provide additional incentive to complete it before priority registration period. SAs will receive credit for the assignment once they have verified their schedule with their AAC.

Module 7: Get Involved

This module will stretch over a three-week period in order to allow SAs the opportunity to take part in various activities during the given time frame. The objective of this module is to help SAs become more integrated with fellow classmates and increase participation and involvement as a student on campus. During their first week, SAs will identify one club or student organization of interest on campus and submit contact information for the group, as well as meeting times (if applicable). Although it is not required of them to attend club or organization meetings, it is strongly encouraged through the course to do so, if it fits within their schedule. This opportunity allows them to diversify their interests and overall identity outside of athletic endeavors. During the second week of this module, SAs are asked to comment about a campus-related issue through *MySUU Voice*, an online platform designed to provide students an opportunity to discuss relevant campus topics. They must submit feedback through the specific service in order to receive credit from their course instructor. The assignment will be considered complete once a representative for *MySUU Voice* confirms with their instructor that they have filled out the survey. This assignment will teach SAs how to use this platform, which allows them to contribute to important student-related issues on campus. For the last week of Module 7, SAs are required to attend a campus event and upload a photo of themselves in attendance there. They must also submit the name and title of the event, as well as the date that it occurred. Although this assignment is required to be finished by the end of this module, they can attend any campus event during the entirety of the semester and have it count towards fulfilling assignment requirements. As such, it is important that the course instructor bring this assignment to the attention of the class prior to its due date so that SAs have time to make arrangements to complete the assignment at some point during the semester.

Module 8: Prepare for Your Future

This module will take place over two weeks. The objective of this module is to introduce SAs to tools and resources available that will assist them in formulating a plan for their future career. They will first be required to complete one of the following: meet with a career advisor on campus or attend a career workshop offered by SUU during the semester. In order to give them time to decide, it is important that the course instructor make SAs aware early about when career workshops are offered during the designated semester. SAs will be required to upload a photo of themselves at the career fair they attend, as well as summarize their experience and include one job that they learned about there that they may have interest in learning more about. If they decide to meet with a career advisor, SAs will receive points by requesting that their career advisor email the course instructor to verify that they met. During the second week of this module, SAs will be asked to create a *LinkedIn* profile, if they have not already done so. Recommendations will be given about how to set up an effective profile through various SUU resources (2019). Once they have completed their profile, they will receive credit for the assignment by connecting with their course instructor via *LinkedIn*. They must also submit their profile URL in Canvas by copying and pasting the address into the assignment section. Although it is likely that most first-year SAs will not have a specified career chosen to pursue post-sport during class tenure or by end of this module, the resources discussed should provide them with tools that may lead them to a desired career path.

Module 9: Reflecting on your First Semester

This module will take place during the final week of the semester. The objective of this module is to allow SAs to ponder and discuss their semester performance and how they can improve moving forward. They will complete this assignment by writing a brief summary of

their experiences and submitting it to Canvas. In order to guide SAs in this process, the following prompts (or something similar) should be used:

- What are areas where you feel that you succeeded in your first semester? (these can be school-related, work-related, home-related, etc.)
- What are the areas where you feel you can improve moving forward?
- Have your feelings about college life changed since experiencing one full semester on campus? If so, how have they changed?
- What responsibilities do you feel you have as a student-athlete at SUU? How can you fulfill these responsibilities?
- What advice would you give future first-year freshman students?

This week is important in evaluating whether this course is fulfilling its overall objectives. If SAs are benefitting from information taught, it should be apparent in this document. It may also provide future course instructors with ideas about additional curriculum to incorporate in succeeding semesters.

Results

The purposes of this course are to increase facilitation of the organizational network of SAs, improve the transitional process of SAs from high school to college, and help them better understand their own goals, roles, and responsibilities. Through semester reflection assignments and course/instructor evaluations, we can determine whether this course is fulfilling said purpose.

The following comments were made by students of the course from course evaluation forms²:

- “I think it was really good. It was tough because they are always busy but they still made time for us.”
- “The transition hasn’t been too bad for me. The university has done a great job to accommodate all of my needs!”
- “I think this class is helpful to the freshman because it helps you find specific offices that you might need in the future and things you might not know about if you didn’t take this course.”
- “I learned lots in this class. Very informational and helped me identify where things were and what they do.”

The following comments were made by students of the course from the semester reflection assignment:

- “I feel like my first semester of college was a definite success. It was not always easy and often stretched me. I learned skills that I plan on using throughout the rest of my life. At times it was difficult for me to balance all of my responsibilities, but as I learned to better manage my time I was so much more productive.”
- “I have learned that I will need to study more for tests and receive the needed tutoring on material I cannot learn on my own. I have tried to do everything on my own this past semester, but plan to use more tutoring resources for harder classes in the future. I can definitely improve on finishing homework on time and studying more for my tests. The

² Comments are unedited and directly from course evaluation forms, which may contain typos and grammatical issues.

depth of the material is a lot more than high school, so it will require me to put forth effort in studying and learning the material.”

- “I felt like I was really on top of school the whole semester which made me very happy. I feel like I can improve on my time management habits of studying ahead of time, like a week or two before, to study for exams. My feelings about college haven’t really changed, I’m just taking it day by day and enjoying it because I know that one day I’ll be walking across the stage in my cap and gown to grab my diploma and work from on out until I retire.”
- “The best advice I have for future first-year students is just make sure you put school first because college is the most important thing for you in your life. You only have four years of it and you want to make sure you can graduate with a degree that you want and love.”

Discussion

A primary objective to the development of this course was to improve the first-year SA network so that a better understanding of roles and responsibilities can be attained by SAs early in their college career. As such, the Network Theory of Organizational Communication was used to show how first-year SAs are comparable to new employees in an organization. A certain amount of information must be given to these individuals initially so that they can begin to understand role expectations and develop a sense of identity in the organization. Thus, this course was designed to be a formal type of training for the new “employee”. Using Monge and Contractor’s goals of what each organizational network should accomplish (2001), it is possible to see how this class can help SAs meet their needs:

Control the flow of information. Many SAs mentioned in their evaluation that this class helped them to know what they needed to do in their first semester of college. One SA wrote, “I

think this course is helpful to the freshman because it helps you find... things you might not know about if you didn't take this course." By creating a module-based curriculum, information was given to SAs in a digestible manner so that they might know how to identify it as relevant and apply what they learned.

Allow for exchanges of resources among participants. Many modules in this course required SAs to reach out to various personnel on campus. Because each individual contacted by SAs have a responsibility to help and support students on campus, these assignments facilitated an interaction that allowed them to fulfill their position duties. Simultaneously, SAs benefitted from learning about how each individual can help them to be successful and how to contact them when needed.

Bring people with common interests and backgrounds together. Module 7's primary objective was to get SAs involved on campus and help them to interact with their fellow teammates and students. For example, the assignment to identify a club or organization that they would be interested in joining helps to facilitate the initial aspect of connecting SAs with others of similar backgrounds and interests. Additionally, there were some assignments that could be completed together with classmates. Many course participants took required selfie photos with teammates yet submitted them individually.

This course and its curriculum seemed to benefit many students, based on comments made during evaluations and reflections. Many noted that they were able to learn skills during this first semester that helped them to be successful, specifically skills and information taught in this class. Topics such as time management and study skills were a prevalent theme among many commenters. This may be indicative of essential areas to focus on moving forward. Although there were portions of this course that discussed these topics, it may be ideal to place more

emphasis on these areas. It should be noted that not all students provided course feedback or completed their semester reflection assignment. Therefore, it may be difficult to assess the needs of the majority of SAs taking this class.

An area of emphasis that increased overall engagement among SAs was the attention to video commentary and feedback used for modules and assignments. Using mediated channels to enhance interpersonal interaction helped to increase engagement of SAs.

Limitations

As mentioned previously, a contingent of SAs that took this course expressed that they were benefitted in some capacity by material taught throughout the semester. However, there are many improvements that should be made to justify the existence of such a course being taught regularly on campus at SUU.

Integrate seminars to improve interpersonal experience. Multiple course evaluations were submitted providing feedback like the following comment: “I think this class was ran well. The only thing I would change is have classes with speakers because they are helpful and useful to most.” There seems to be a general interest in incorporating traditional F2F methods to compliment the online/hybrid portion of this course. This area of interest could be for many reasons. First, it may provide a more hands-on learning experience and networking opportunity for SAs and the course instructor or seminar speaker. Greater ease of access to individuals that can help improve the overall college experience may be a crucial step in the process of each SA finding a balance among their many roles that they take on while in school. Second, it may be a social bonding opportunity for SAs and a chance to enhance overall morale within the athletic department. Stander, Rothmann, and Botha (2015) found that positive teammate relationships

can be a factor in athletes experiencing *flow state*. This class may facilitate SAs to not only connect with their teammates in a non-athletic setting, but also SAs from different sports.

Limit class size. Presently, all incoming freshmen are enrolled into one section of this course, regardless of the amount of SAs. Because there is no regularly-scheduled meeting time, this class does not interfere with any SA schedule. However, if guest speakers present to the class, it could prove difficult to gather all SAs in such a large quantity and may deter from the guest speaking experience. As it was previously discussed, there seems to be a general interest in having short presentations included throughout the semester. In order to avoid potential issues with a large gathering of students, it may be best in the future to split this course into two or more sections, depending on the number of incoming freshmen per semester and/or the availability of instructors willing to teach.

Include health and wellness module to curriculum. Physical and mental health are important factors to consider regarding SAs. Mental health among SAs has steadily grown for the past few decades (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005), and sport psychologists are becoming more prevalent on campus in order to combat this epidemic. First-year SAs may benefit from a section in this course that discusses health and wellness in all its forms. Educating them early (and formally) on this subject may help to mitigate this issue in a minor capacity. Additional steps should be taken by each athletic department to ensure that help resources are always available for struggling SAs.

Incorporate additional faculty integration to develop SA relationship. A key determinant for a SA's college experience is connected to relationships they create with their professors while on campus (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Providing more opportunities for SAs to engage with their instructors may help to balance out their understanding of roles as both

a student and athlete. SAs regularly interact with coaches and other sport administrators. That may not be the case with their instructors. Outside of the classroom, interaction is limited and often hindered by athletic responsibilities. SAs in this course may find it worthwhile to learn how to appropriately foster a working relationship with their respective instructors. Assignment ideas may include visiting their instructors during office hours, getting to know their instructors by asking them non-evasive personal questions, and personally inviting their instructors to their sporting events.

Conclusion

As college sports continue to grow in popularity and sport-governing bodies enforce academic-related policies, SAs will require additional support as they attempt to understand their roles and responsibilities. While donning what Howes (2017) refers to as the “Athlete Mask”, SAs may forego non sport-related opportunities and responsibilities to cover up insecurities or a lack of understanding of what they should accomplish while in this time of life. Wearing this mask creates confusion and may ultimately lead to increased anxiety as SAs plan to transition into post-athlete life.

The university course, *Student-Athlete College Success*, was developed for first-year SAs to help combat any confusion about their roles and to create a better balance between both the “student” and “athlete” responsibilities they are required to fulfill. This was done by training SAs in a similar manner as to how new employees at a company might learn about their duties and responsibilities. By using Network Theory and pedagogical methods for first-year students, the course was set up to create and bolster the organizational networks SAs should develop while in college. It also served as a resource to teach them how to be successful in all their roles.

Although the course has only been taught for one academic year (as of the publication of this report), it seems that the course has been successful so far in fulfilling its objectives. This conclusion is based on student feedback via course evaluations and semester reflection assignments. Despite its mostly positive results, there are still many improvements to be made. Presently, the most requested improvement is to integrate more interpersonal experience opportunities into the course. This is consistent with organizational research found about the connection between positive interpersonal experiences and employee satisfaction (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). Moving forward, it may be appropriate to regularly update curriculum, based on the needs and challenges that arise for each new generation of SAs.

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