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# Communication privacy management in college athletics: Exploring privacy dilemmas in the athletic/academic advisor student-athlete interpersonal relationship

Jason Thompson

**KEYWORDS:**

Privacy Boundary, Academic Advising, College Student-Athletes, Athletic/Academic Advisors, Communication Privacy Management theory

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**ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of the present study was to explore how athletic/academic advisors communicatively managed privacy boundaries with college student-athletes. The researcher interviewed 37 athletic/academic advisors to address one central research question: What type of dilemmas do athletic/academic advisors experience when managing the privacy boundary surrounding student-athletes' private information? Athletic/academic advisors who were interviewed represented 21 different institutions of four different NCAA division levels (i.e., I, IAA, II, and III), and more than 10 separate NCAA athletic conferences. Findings indicated that athletic/academic advisors experienced different types of dilemmas which revolved around private information student-athletes disclosed regarding academic, athletic, and personal issues. This research presents specific dilemmas advisors experienced. Practical applications as well as directions for future research are also discussed.*

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The interpersonal relationship between athletic/academic advisors<sup>1</sup> and student-athletes<sup>2</sup> is salient on college campuses (Gaston-Gayles, 2003; Nadler & Nader, 1999). Student-athletes frequently meet with their advisors, and during these interactions, advisors listen to student-athletes' concerns and sometimes offer advice which helps them navigate both their academic and athletic journeys (Broughton, 2001; Meyer, 2005). Not surprisingly, over the course of these interactions, it is common for a meaningful relationship to develop given the tremendous influence of advisors (Jordan & Denson, 1990). In fact, many student-athletes feel comfortable self-disclosing private information to advisors concerning issues they (i.e., student-athletes) regularly deal with (Denson, 1996; Parham, 1993). Some of

these issues include balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, struggling with learning disabilities, handling the close scrutiny of the media, and maintaining relationships with friends and family (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Clark & Parette, 2002; Hill, Burch-Ragan, & Yates, 2001).

When advisors receive private information from student-athletes pertaining to any of the aforementioned issues as confidants they may find themselves trying to decide what to reveal and what to conceal from others. Researchers have argued this is a decision confidants recurrently make (Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003; Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002). For example, a student-athlete may disclose some private information to an advisor regarding dissatisfaction with the way

the coach is treating him/her (Conrad, 2006). Furthermore, the student-athlete may reveal that the feeling of dissatisfaction is causing him/her to consider leaving the institution. Subsequent to receiving this disclosure the advisor has to choose whether or not to disclose that information to the student-athlete's coach because the situation patently affects the coach's team. At first glance, it may appear this decision is relatively straightforward. However, some factors may make this decision substantially more complicated than it seems. First, the decision is complicated because there may not be a set of clear, documented institutional guidelines that inform the advisor how to proceed in this situation. Without these guidelines advisors are left to their own devices having to make a decision based on their personal philosophy. Second, the decision is complex because, in these types of situations, it is common for confidants to experience the difficulty of being caught in the middle between persons after receiving private information. In fact, researchers have established the difficulties of feeling caught in the middle between others as one is privy to private information and expected to know how and when to reveal and conceal information (Braithwaite, Toller, Dass, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). The difficulty lies in the loyalty conflicts that regularly ensue when confidants are caught in the middle and experience the tension of revelation-concealment which comes as a result of being in this position (Afifi, 2003). In the aforementioned example, subsequent to receiving the private information from the student-athlete, the advisor might find him or herself in the unnerving position of being caught in the middle between two persons: the student-athlete and the student-athlete's coach. The advisor is caught in this position as he or she tries to decide which loyalty will be privileged. In sum, this scenario paints a real portrait of a remarkably difficult place in which advisors may routinely find themselves

as they try to settle on how private information revealed to them from student-athletes will be handled.

The purpose of the present study is to describe the experience of advisors as they communicatively manage private information divulged to them from student-athletes. This research is significant for a couple of reasons. First, the decisions advisors make as they manage student-athletes' private information have significant ramifications for student-athletes and the athletic department. Therefore, a complete understanding of this issue is warranted. Second, this study has an applied nature as the information can be used to educate and inform future advisors who plan to work with college student-athletes. In this way, future advisors will be better informed about their position and will learn from the experiences described by other advisors as they have managed private information from student-athletes. Put differently, future advisors may glean some information from this study that helps them become more effective advisors.

### *Third Party Disclosures*

As noted earlier, when advisors receive private information from student-athletes, they face decisions about how they will manage the privacy boundary surrounding the information. In other words, they have to decide if they will open the privacy boundary to others or keep the privacy boundary closed. If advisors decide to share the information with someone else (e.g., counseling psychologist), then the person with whom they share the information is known as a third party member (Petronio & Bantz, 1991; Petronio, 2002, 2004; Rotenberg, 1986). When information is shared with third party members, the information is no longer exclusively co-owned by the student-athlete and the advisor, but instead, the dyadic boundary is now transformed to include the third party individual (Christophe & Rime, 1997). For example, if a student-

athlete discloses to an advisor that he or she is suffering from depression, in this situation the advisor might be motivated to reveal this information to a sports counseling psychologist so the psychologist can help the student-athlete cope with this fragile psychological state (Bunker & McGuire, 1985; Hinkle, 1996). The advisor may feel that the psychologist's involvement is integral because, as researchers have noted, some student-athletes resort to self-damaging behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse (Damm & Murray, 1996) and eating disorders (Gutgesell, Moreau, & Thompson, 2003) causing them to feel emotionally and psychologically depleted as they deal with personal issues. Because the student-athlete's private information was revealed to the psychologist, this individual is now one of the co-owners of the information (along with the student-athlete and the advisor). As a co-owner this person is also responsible for how the information is managed thus underscoring the complexity of this matter.

As advisors consider whether or not to reveal student-athletes private information to others, the legal guidelines of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) may influence their decision making process. FERPA was designed to protect the educational privacy of college students (National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], n.d.). Also known as the Buckley amendment, FERPA stipulates that institutions are required to conceal students' educational records until students (or the students' parents, if student age requirement is not met) grant permission for those records to be revealed. Students have the option to waive their right to privacy of their educational records. If they waive the right to privacy, then information concerning their educational records can be disclosed to a third party such as a parent (NACADA, n.d.). Student-athletes who voluntarily waive their right to privacy, for example, typically sign a waiver form at the

beginning of the school year. Upon signing the waiver form, information about their grades, classroom performance, and other educational information may be shared with others. A representative example of this is the semester grade reports that advisors solicit from professors which document student-athletes' current grades in their courses (Denson, 1996).

Another aspect that may influence the decision making process of advisors is whether or not student-athletes directly inform advisors that they do not want their information relayed to a third party member. In other words, the student-athlete may notify the advisor to keep the information concealed or use a prior restraint phrase. Prior restraint phrases (e.g., "don't tell anybody this") are phrases used by disclosers ahead of revealing their information to a confidant (Petronio & Bantz, 1991). Petronio and Bantz explained, "Prior restraint phrases come before private information is revealed, allowing disclosers to extend personal control by indicating that restricted access of this information should be applied (e.g., don't tell anyone)" (p. 263). This personal control makes it clearly known how the discloser of the private information wants that information to be handled. For example, after a student-athlete reveals to an advisor that he/she experimented with performance enhancing drugs, the student-athlete could say to the advisor, "Please don't tell anyone such as my coach and parents." In this situation the advisor may feel an ethical responsibility to inform the coach and/or parents. At the same time, however, the advisor may not want to damage the relationship with the student-athlete by ignoring the prior restraint phrase. This is a difficult position for the advisor to be in because, though there might be a set of guidelines that inform the advisor how to proceed, the instructions communicated by the student-athlete may weigh heavily on the advisor. As aforementioned, the purpose of the present study is to explore the experiences

of advisors as they manage private information that student-athletes reveal to them. In the following the theoretical framework employed in the present study is discussed.

#### *Communication Privacy Management Theory*

Communication privacy management (CPM) theory provides an understanding of how people manage private information (Petronio, 2002). There are several main principles that represent the evidenced-based theory of CPM (e.g., Morr Serewicz & Petronio, 2007; Petronio & Durham, 2008). To illustrate the way the theoretical principles function, Petronio (2002) uses a boundary metaphor. Thus, principle one states that people define private information as something they own and they consider the information belonging to them. As such, the information is housed within an individual's privacy boundary. Principle two states that because people believe they own their private information they also believe they have a right to control that information. Principle three contends that the way people control their private information is through the use of privacy rules. Principle four predicts that through granting access to private information, either disclosing or some other means, individuals create shared privacy boundaries that are co-owned and mutually managed. Principle five states that when shared boundaries exist, they are mutually managed through boundary coordination. By coordinating the mutually shared privacy boundary, the co-owners negotiate collective privacy rules that regulate the shared boundary using several processes (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002; Petronio & Durham, 2008).

#### *Boundary Turbulence*

Petronio (2002) argued that boundary turbulence may occur when people are managing a shared privacy boundary, making choices about how the boundary will be

coordinated. Boundary turbulence is the result of when problems arise during the boundary coordination process. Petronio (2002) explained, "When coordination becomes asynchronous, turbulence erupts, disturbing the harmony of boundary management of private information" (p. 177). These problems have many profiles, for example, when confidants are unsure about how to manage private information disclosed to them (i.e., dilemma). Put differently, the confidant may experience a privacy dilemma in the midst of trying to decide whether to reveal the information or conceal the information. In the present study, advisors are confidants who may experience a privacy dilemma while managing a disclosure from a student-athlete. The dilemma might be spurred because (a) the advisor is not aware of any specific guidelines that inform him/her how to proceed, (b) the advisor feels caught in the middle between two different people and is therefore trying to decide which loyalty to privilege or which relationship to honor, or (c) the advisor received a prior restraint phrase issued by the student-athlete that informed him/her how to handle the situation, but the advisor may not feel led to respect that request. The dilemmas confidants experience truly underscores the complexity of privacy management communication and leads to the following research question:

RQ1: What type of dilemmas, if any, do athletic/academic advisors experience when managing the privacy boundary surrounding student-athletes' private information?

The research question draws attention to the intricate process of communication privacy management (e.g., Caughlin & Petronio, 2004) as experienced by advisors in their interactions with student-athletes. The tenets and suppositions of CPM theory provide clear guidance to examine the context under study.



## Method

### *Participation Criteria*

Participants were purposively selected for the present study. Purposeful sampling involves intentionally electing to choose particular persons who can provide the researcher with the information needed to answer the research questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The sample of participants was comprised of 37 ( $n=37$ ) current and former athletic/academic advisors of college student-athletes. Participants were representative of NCAA Division I ( $n=30$ ), IAA ( $n=2$ ), II ( $n=4$ ), and III ( $n=1$ ) colleges and universities. Participants also varied in terms of level of experience. For instance, some advisors only had a few years of experience in the field of athletic/academic advising, while others had at least a decade of experience. Participants were originally recruited with an email announcement. Those who responded to the original announcement were asked to refer other people to the researcher who they knew would want to participate. This practice enabled the researcher to take advantage of the snowball sampling technique (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In terms of gender and race, 21 males and 16 females participated and 17 were African American and 20 identified as Caucasian.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

Due to the qualitative, interpretive nature of this study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain information from participants, and an interview protocol was used (McCracken, 1988; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Qualitative researchers have various data collection options (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), however, semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection in the present study because this method engenders rich detail in the responses of participants. Semi-structured interviews also allow researchers to probe the viewpoints of participants (McCracken,

1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In the beginning of the interview protocol, participants were asked basic demographic information such as age, sex, ethnicity, division level of institution, and number of years in the academic advising of student-athletes profession. Following this, the respondents were asked a series of questions, such as, "Can you describe how often you meet with student-athletes during a normal week?" "Tell me about a time, if ever, when you were unsure what to do with information revealed to you by a student-athlete," "Imagine a student-athlete told you (some problematic news for the student, e.g., was depressed), what would you do or say?" and "What have you done with information revealed to you from a student-athlete during a meeting?" Interview lengths ranged from approximately 45-60 minutes. All of the in-person interviews ( $n=26$ ) were conducted at an agreed upon location by both the participants and the researcher. The remaining interviews ( $n=11$ ) occurred over the telephone.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Data was analyzed following Smith's (1995) emerging theme method. First, each transcript was read through to gain familiarity with the textual data. Second, the transcripts were read through a second time to note emerging themes. To identify emerging themes in the data, Owen's (1984) tripartite method of thematic interpretation was employed. According to Owen, a theme should meet three criteria: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness. Third, all emerging themes were listed and searched for how they related to one another. While carrying out this step, given that thematic analysis is iterative, as themes were discovered within the textual data collected, these themes were collapsed. Smith referred to the collapsing of themes as "clustering" (p. 19). A label was then created for each of the

categories of themes, using terminology of CPM theory, until theoretical saturation was reached (Creswell, 1998; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Theoretical saturation constitutes observing comparable patterns and themes, and as a result, new categories no longer being generated. A “memo” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 193) was then produced for the categories of themes by joining them with quotations or exemplar statements given by the participants.

After analysis of the data, the results were verified using member checking as the verification strategy (Creswell, 1998; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Stake, 1995). A form of researcher triangulation, member checking is the process by which researchers share the results with the participants from whom they collected the data to, “verify the viability of [the] interpretations” (Harter et. al., 2008, p. 431). This method of researcher triangulation is important as participants have the opportunity to challenge what they recognize as incorrect interpretations of the researcher. Member checks were completed with 26 out of the 37 participants and they did not perceive any errors which warranted challenging the interpretations. In other words, they perceived the interpretations as a fair and accurate account of what they said during the interview. Five of those who completed member checks did volunteer additional information. This information mainly included those participants recalling an instance when they were unsure about how to proceed with private information shared with them from a student-athlete.

## Results

In this research I endeavored to discover what type of dilemmas, if any, athletic/academic advisors experience when managing the privacy boundary surrounding private information revealed to them from student-athletes. Three

recurring themes were found that symbolized the types of dilemmas advisors experienced. Themes reflected the uncertainty that emerged when advisors received private information from student-athletes mainly involving: (a) academic privacy dilemma, (b) athletic privacy dilemma, and (c) personal privacy dilemma. In the following, I discuss each of these in turn.

### *Academic Privacy Dilemmas*

The first type of privacy dilemma concerned academic issues. Based on what participants reported, this privacy dilemma centered on academic integrity.

### *Academic Integrity*

Advisors gave examples of student-athletes disclosing to them academic integrity issues related to: (a) being caught plagiarizing while completing class term papers, and (b) cheating on course exams. In each of these examples, advisors faced a dilemma of whether or not to reveal to someone else what student-athletes confided to them. For instance, regarding plagiarism, an advisor recounted a situation when a student-athlete revealed he was caught plagiarizing in a paper he submitted for one of his classes. After receiving this disclosure from the student-athlete, the advisor became a co-owner of the private information. As such, she struggled choosing between the two alternatives of revealing or concealing the student-athlete’s private information to the coach. The advisor explained:

One time I had a kid come into my office and close the door and just start sobbing. I reached for a box of Kleenex, the student said, “I have something to tell you.” He said, “I was caught plagiarizing on a paper. I was caught cheating.” [He said], “Well I went to the honor board and I admitted it and I’m going to get an “F” in the class.” He was just sobbing

and his whole body was shaking and clearly this kid made a mistake and feels horrible about it. I gave him a tissue box and I said, "You know I care about you and we all make mistakes, and you've handled it very well...just don't do it again." He left my office and I'm thinking, "Now what do I do?" This was an academic issue that affects us. Coaches had a very strong anti-plagiarism, anti-cheating policy. But at the same time [the student-athlete] went through the entire procedure, got an "F" in the class, messed up, did what campus required him to do. And I just knew that if I told the coach that this kid plagiarized and was caught the coach would not necessarily be happy. But at the same time when the grades would come in coach would see the "F" in whatever class it was and say, "Why did [this student-athlete] get an 'F'?" So, I was in a pickle in that situation. (P15: 354)<sup>3</sup>

In this example, the advisor did not believe the student-athlete should receive added punishment from the coach. On the other hand, not linking the privacy boundary with the coach risked getting the advisor in trouble if the coach ever discovered the transgression of the student-athlete and the fact that the advisor had knowledge about the transgression but decided not to reveal it to the coach. Therefore, based on these two sides, the advisor used the metaphor of being "in a pickle" to illustrate the dilemma that she was feeling. There were ramifications if she divulged to the coach what the student-athlete confided to her, just as there were ramifications if she did not divulge to the coach what the student-athlete confided.

Advisors not only experienced dilemmas involving plagiarism, but they also experienced dilemmas in instances when student-athletes

admitted to cheating on course exams. For example, an advisor was unsure whether or not to link the privacy boundary with a professor after learning from a student-athlete that the student-athlete got away with cheating on an exam in the professor's class. What stimulated the dilemma for the advisor was that he believed it was unethical to conceal from the professor that the student-athlete cheated on the exam and, at the same time, knowing revealing to the professor that the student-athlete cheated on the exam may result in the student-athlete being expelled from the institution. He first recounted what the student-athlete divulged:

A [student-athlete] had told me that he had cheated on an exam. And the [student-athlete] did extremely well [on the exam]. You know the [student-athlete] was under enough pressure that he finally broke down and told me that he had cheated. In this case he cheated and he got away with it. (P30: 578)

When probed about why the advisor experienced the dilemma, he explained:

I think in terms of the uncertainty becomes what do you do with this [information]? You know, do you have the responsibility to go back and notify the professor? We [i.e., student-athlete and athletic/academic advisor] sat down and shared it with the coach. But I think at that point in time, from my perspective it becomes kind of an ethical situation in terms again, do you include the professor, do you go back and notify the professor? You know the kid has the potential of getting kicked out of school, how do you manage, what do you do with it? I found that to be a very tough situation. (P30: 579)

As this exemplar demonstrates, the advisor chose to link the privacy boundary with the



coach but was uncertain whether or not to do the same thing with the professor. This was not an easy situation and it was apparent that the advisor experienced conflicting alternatives. One might argue that it is a troubling sign the advisor would not know how to proceed in this ethical situation. This calls attention to a lack of adequate advisor training in the athletic department; something that will be addressed later on in this study. In the following the second type of privacy dilemma (i.e., athletic privacy dilemmas) experienced by advisors is discussed.

#### *Athletic Privacy Dilemmas*

A second type of privacy dilemma which advisors experienced concerned athletic issues. This was arranged into two subcategories: (a) transfer to another school, and (b) injuries.

#### *Transfer to Another School*

Advisors acknowledged that they were left to decide between the alternatives of revealing and concealing, mostly to coaches, student-athletes' private information about wanting to transfer schools. In these instances, as a co-owner of the private information, advisors were caught between the student-athlete and the coach. For example, an advisor recounted an incident when a student-athlete revealed to him a desire to transfer to a different school. The advisor reflected:

I had some student-athlete tell me she wanted to transfer. And I wasn't really sure if I should let the coach know because it would ultimately affect his program, or who I should let know. I mean I was really up-in-arms about it, you know, I was torn because it was one of the stronger players who wanted to leave and that would ultimately affect the coach. In this situation I was at odds with myself because you don't want to lose

the trust of your coaches. You know the coach might say, "Why didn't you tell me that this student was thinking about transferring, I could have recruited for the replacement?" And so sometimes the coaches would look at you and say, "You're losing my trust" because you did not reveal that information to them because it would ultimately benefit them. But at the same time you have an obligation to the student-athlete to respect their confidential information. (P24: 489)

As this excerpt demonstrates, the advisor experienced a dilemma as a result of being caught between the student-athlete and the coach. He believed the coach expected that he would inform him about the student-athlete's desire to transfer so that he (i.e., the coach) could begin the process of finding a replacement, especially since it was one of the, "stronger players" on the team. On the other hand, the advisor believed he had an obligation to the student-athlete to conceal from the coach the student-athlete's private information about transferring. Taken together, this is what caused him to be, "at odds with himself" and "up-in-arms" about it." He was aware that failure to reveal the private information to the coach may cause him to lose the trust of the coach and undermine the coach's efforts to recruit for the student-athlete's replacement. Conversely, failure to keep the student-athlete's private information concealed from the coach would, as he stated, cause him to feel like he was not fulfilling an obligation he understood he had to the student-athlete. These competing alternatives caused a considerable tension within the advisor.

The privacy dilemmas regarding student-athletes' desire to transfer to another school reflected loyalty conflicts which advisors had with student-athletes and with a coach, given they had a close personal relationship with

both. For example, an advisor reflected on an occasion when she felt, “loyalty to two different people” as she was faced with a choice between revealing and concealing when a student-athlete confided to her about wanting to transfer to a different school. The advisor recounted:

I had one of my students told me that he was thinking about transferring but he didn't want me to tell the coach, he didn't want it to get out because he didn't want the coach to stop playing him or punish him. Now I'm fairly close to the basketball team, one of the coaches on the basketball team, and I felt kind of guilty not telling him because he would ask me, Have you talked to so and so, has he said anything, he's being different, you know we don't really know what is going on with him. (P32: 607-608)

When probed about what caused the dilemma for the advisor, she explained, “I had a little bit of loyalty to two different people. I had loyalty I felt like I was kind of being dishonest with my friend on the basketball staff.” (P32: 608). She felt “guilty” not revealing to the coach what was going on with the student-athlete because she had a relationship with the coach. Given this relationship, she believed that she should be open with him. At the same time, however, she had a relationship with the student-athlete and thus felt she should not be transparent with the coach about the student-athlete's situation. She also realized the student-athlete may be punished by the coach if the coach found out about the student-athlete's desire to transfer to another school. Given both sides, she was in a difficult situation being fiercely torn in deciding how to proceed.

### *Injuries*

A second type of athletic privacy dilemma reported by advisors was when student-athletes disclosed private information about

physical injuries. This disclosure left advisors to experience a dilemma concerning whether or not to reveal the private information to someone in the athletic department who could intervene. For example, an advisor remembered when a student-athlete confided to him about a knee injury which was causing much pain. He first explained what the student-athlete divulged to him and the dilemma experienced:

I've had injury situations before and the student-athlete really didn't want to tell the coach that it was getting worse. And you know I'm thinking, “Should I maybe say something so that the student can have it looked at again, or should I not because it's their own business” you know? I had a student come to me and say, “You know I just had knee surgery and my knee is still hurting and everybody is pushing me to play and I'm playing but I get a shot before [I play] and I don't really feel like playing. And my knee is hurting worse than I'm letting on but I don't want to let coaches know, because if I do I won't play a lot.” So that was the scenario, you know he just came and said, “I don't want nobody to know, but my knee is really hurting worse than it is.” And he didn't really want to tell me about it, because he didn't want to not play. But also [the student-athlete] didn't want to risk damaging themselves. I didn't know what to do, or what to say to anybody [about this situation]. (P13: 299)

As this exemplar demonstrates, the advisor struggled as he faced two different alternatives. He wanted to reveal the student-athlete's injury to someone in the athletic training room as he stated, “Should I maybe say something so that the student can have it looked at again,” because the student-athlete's health was enormously

important. However, he also believed that concealing the information may be a better choice, concluding that if the student-athlete wanted someone to get involved in the matter then the student-athlete could get that person involved. In the end, the advisor reported that he concealed the information. This is yet another situation which one might find troubling given the huge ramification imposed on the student-athlete. The implications of this decision will be addressed in the discussion section. In the following I discuss personal privacy dilemmas experienced by advisors.

#### *Personal Privacy Dilemmas*

The third type of privacy dilemma that advisors discussed experiencing revolved around personal issues. These data were categorized as the following: (a) personal health and wellness, and (b) family pressure.

#### *Personal Health and Wellness*

Advisors discussed personal health and wellness issues as primarily mental health concerns. When student-athletes disclosed to them about these personal issues, they faced a choice between revealing and concealing the student-athlete's private information to or from third party members such as coaches and parents, for example. For instance, an advisor described an occasion when a student-athlete confided to her about a series of problems, including nostalgia and discontent with school, he was experiencing. The flurry of problems experienced by the student-athlete led to a significantly fragile mental health condition. The advisor perceived that these disclosures reflected a series of underlying issues and she believed the student-athlete indirectly confided, as a result of experiencing these problems, that he could potentially commit suicide when he said, "I don't know if I can see the end of the semester." In this situation the advisor was uncertain if the problems with which the

student-athlete was dealing were serious enough for him to be contemplating suicide. Thus, she was unsure what to do as she explained:

I had a student where there was an instance where it was his little brother's birthday halfway across the world. He is an international student. And this was the first time that he had ever been away for his birthday. He told me that he was very, very homesick and had lots of other problems going on. He said that he hated school. He said that he didn't feel like he fit in here. He said that he was just miserable here. And there was a big concern of, you know he was talking he was very unhappy, he didn't know what he was gonna do, he didn't know if, his exact words to me were, "I don't know if I can see the end of the semester." To me, I don't know what that means. I don't know if that means I am so deep piled under my books that I'm not ever gonna get through it. And with this student I'm not sure exactly what that meant. So you know we kind of just talked about it. You know with that I told him you know, "I don't exactly know where you're going with this." And so you know I was unsure because I didn't think that it was anything but I didn't want to guess and be wrong in that case. It was very hard to know what to do. So I said I'd rather be safe and send him over to [counseling] rather than be getting a call in the middle of the night about him. (P25: 501)

Although she made a final decision to reveal the student-athlete's private information to a counselor, she did acknowledge experiencing a dilemma as she said, "It was very hard to know what to do." If she revealed the information and it turned out that the student-athlete was not

referring to committing suicide, then this may have caused the student-athlete embarrassment and/or shame. However, if she decided to conceal the information and the student-athlete did end up committing suicide then this may have left her feeling guilty and responsible as she could have notified someone about what the student-athlete disclosed to her. This is a distressful position for the advisor to be in. At first glance, it may appear to be an easy decision, but, as we can see, advisors do struggle with trying to decide how to proceed.

### *Family Pressure*

Advisors reported that some student-athletes disclosed they felt pressure from their parents in order to succeed in the future. In this case, student-athletes perceived their parents were depending on them to secure lucrative professional sports contracts in the future and to bring that money home to share with their family. After receiving this disclosure from the student-athlete, advisors experienced a dilemma trying to decide if they were going to tell someone else about what the student-athlete confided to them. For example, an advisor described an instance when a student-athlete revealed that his mother told him she hoped he would purchase her a luxury vehicle when he was selected to play professional football. Upon receiving this private disclosure from the student-athlete, the advisor faced a dilemma as she was unsure whether or not to share this with someone else. She explained:

A lot of times a common incident is a student-athlete, particularly in high profile sports mentioning how their parents are depending on them to make money and go to the league or professional sports. We had one incident where I had a very famous football player come in and said, "Yeah my mom called me today and said she hopes I'll buy her a Porsche

when I'm drafted in the [National Football League]." And you know that happened pretty frequently. I didn't do nothing with that, it was between him and me, you know I just basically talked to him about it. I kind of wanted to tell someone so that someone could call his mom to tell her to stop putting pressure on the kid...but I decided to keep it quiet. (P15: 349)

The advisor believed that revealing the information, perhaps to another member of the student's family or to her supervisor, could have helped the student-athlete as his mom may have discontinued putting pressure on him to succeed in the future. On the other hand, concealing the information may keep the advisor from causing conflict in the family. This dilemma left the advisor in a difficult situation though ultimately she decided not to reveal the information.

Taken together, in answer to the research question, participants were forthcoming with many different examples of their experiences. Those experiences were organized into academic privacy dilemmas, athletic privacy dilemmas, and personal privacy dilemmas. The main findings are now summarized, followed by a discussion.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate and describe the experience of advisors as they managed the boundary surrounding private information student-athletes revealed to them. I discovered that advisors experienced dilemmas as they managed private information from student-athletes pertaining to various academic, athletic, and personal issues. Put another way, advisors at times found themselves uncertain whether or not they should reveal to someone else that

which the student-athlete divulged to them about those issues. Three broad themes emerged from the present study: (a) advisor as caught in the middle, (b) advisor loyalty conflicts, and (c) the need for clear privacy guidelines. In the following, each of these themes is discussed, along with practical applications and directions for future research.

#### *Advisor as Caught in the Middle*

While advisors experienced confidant privacy dilemmas they also experienced feeling caught in the middle between student-athletes and other persons (e.g., coach) after they received private information from student-athletes. The experience of being caught in the middle highlighted the multiple relationships which advisors maintained with student-athletes and others in the athletic organization, university, as well as with parents. The experience of being caught in the middle was also symbolic of the complexity of advisors' job. Advisors unequivocally have a difficult job as they frequently must make important decisions that impact the lives of those with whom they work. Being caught in the middle truly calls attention to advisors' vulnerability as a co-owner of student-athletes' private information. Advisors are vulnerable by reason that if they make a wrong decision then they, and/or student-athletes, could face dire consequences. Being caught in the middle was an unnerving and disconcerting position in which to be as advisors reported in this study that they were unsure and struggled with what action to take.

The uncomfortable feeling of being caught in the middle, and having to manage multiple relationships while in this position, is similar to a discovery made by researchers who examined the experience of children in post-divorce families and how they often felt caught in the middle between their custodial and noncustodial parents as the children managed privacy boundaries (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008). Other

researchers (e.g., Afifi, 2003) found parents and stepparents felt caught in middle between the children and their spouse as they managed privacy boundaries. These researchers noted that this was an uncomfortable and distressful position for children, parents, and stepparents to be in as, by virtue of being caught between family members, they tried to manage multiple relationships with these members while they were caught in this position. Again, advisors shared the same plight and this caused them to be in difficult situations. Therefore my work extends the previously mentioned literature on being caught in the middle, while extending this work to highlight the importance of this experience for advisors in the department of athletics at a college institution.

#### *Advisor Loyalty Conflicts*

For advisors, the experience of being caught in the middle translated into loyalty conflicts, with their advisees and with a coach or others, with whom they had a relationship. Advisors were aware of the loyalty they had to student-athletes, given the relationship they had cultivated with them. Simultaneously, advisors were aware of the loyalty they had to others (e.g., coaches) given the relationship they established with them. Based on the multiple loyalties, as a co-owner of private information, advisors had to decide which loyalty they were going to privilege. Therefore, when student-athletes disclosed private information to them, they experienced a dilemma of whether or not to transform the dyadic privacy boundary (i.e., between advisor and student-athlete) into a privacy boundary that moved beyond a dyad and thus included other persons (i.e., between advisor, student-athlete, and the other person). This was a markedly stressful situation for advisors to be in because if student-athletes, coaches, parents, or others perceived them privileging one loyalty over another, this could harm the relationship that they had with these parties. Advisors value



each of these relationships and must keep these relationships positive. Failure to maintain favorable relationships would likely pollute the communication climate making it a very difficult working environment for the advisor.

The discovery in the present study that advisors experienced loyalty conflicts is akin to a discovery made by previous researchers who found that children experienced loyalty conflicts in post divorce families, and difficulty and stress as a result of these loyalty conflicts, as they tried to manage multiple relationships, particularly those relationships with their parents (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Given the fact multiple relationships existed, that made it difficult for children to decide which loyalty to privilege, especially given the affection they had for both parents. My work in the present study extends the research by the aforementioned scholars. The present study makes a contribution to examining loyalty conflicts in an organizational context as advisors have an allegiance to multiple persons. This makes it notably difficult to decide which allegiance to privilege.

#### *The Need for Clear Privacy Management Guidelines*

In the present study, student-athletes disclosed not only academic issues to advisors, but also athletic and personal issues. This is consistent with findings by prior researchers concerning the communication that occurs between advisors and student-athletes (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Jordan & Denson, 1990). One advisor was quoted in Meyer's (2005) research stating, "I always told my athletes that I am your life advisor, not just your academic advisor" (p. 18). The fact that student-athletes divulged to advisors about many different issues is one reason why athletic organizations need to develop comprehensive, unambiguous guidelines to

help advisors manage privacy boundaries. In an earlier example, an advisor reported that he was unclear whether or not to inform a faculty member about a student-athlete who disclosed about cheating on a class assignment. Also, an advisor reported that he was unsure whether or not to inform athletic administrative personnel that a student-athlete disclosed that he was suffering from an injury yet felt compelled to compete despite the injury. I argue that both of these situations signal a red flag in advising student-athletes. Advisors should *never* be unsure in either of these situations. Instead, advisors should possess an unequivocal set of guidelines that direct them in knowing the proper protocol for how to handle the various situations they may encounter. They also need to know how to proceed in the event that a situation they encounter is not covered in the guidelines they were provided. If advisors are not provided with this critical information, then it is likely that some will continue to experience dilemmas when student-athletes disclose private information to them. It behooves athletic organizations to help advisors avoid uncertainty while making these important decisions. Failure to help advisors jeopardizes the athletic department and student-athletes. This outcome can and should be avoided.

#### *Practical Applications and Directions for Future Research*

The findings of the present study, from an applied or translational research standpoint, can be translated into practice. Petronio (2007) argued that it is the responsibility of researchers to develop pragmatic and innovative ways to translate their research into practice and hence the research may benefit others outside of the confines of the researcher's particular academic community:

We recognize that in order to address everyday problems we need to go beyond the knowledge discovery

of the basic research enterprise to interpret and apply research outcomes in an effort to develop effective practices for the betterment of everyday life. (p. 215)

To answer Petronio's call, the findings of the present study serves as the basis for producing the material needed for very specific training sessions aimed at providing novice and veteran advisors with useful strategies to handle difficult situations. Any advisor who reads the present study can use the information within to help them produce their own materials for training. With the proper training, novice and veteran advisors will be equipped with knowledge that will help them handle situations when they are experiencing a dilemma. The knowledge will give them firm guidance regarding how to handle the situation and make the proper decisions. They will be confident that the decisions they make are underwritten by departmental policies and procedures. Adequate training may also enable advisors to avert making ill-advised decisions which may result in damaging the student-athlete, the athletic department, or the university.

This type of training is best designed to utilize case studies where the advisors are guided in learning how to handle dilemmas when student-athletes share with them certain private information, come to an understanding of the kind of privacy orientation the advisors might have, and analyze the implicit expectations that the college has for managing information of a personal nature. Thus, this training program has a four-pronged approach; (1) base-line testing for advisors to determine their privacy orientation; (2) presentation, analysis, and recognition of privacy management strategies through scenario-based case studies as the intervention; (3) analysis of explicit and implicit administrative and organizational information management rules; (4) post intervention testing to assess development of privacy

management skills. The content for the case studies will largely be based on the findings of this current study. Each case study will include a hypothetical scenario in which advisors will be asked how they would respond to a specific situation. Adequate training and preparation are important because, for many advisors, privacy management is not something that they have a clear understanding about and, yet, they are often expected to know what to do and how to best both protect the college and protect the student-athlete. In some cases, as we have seen in this study, protecting the student-athlete compromises protection of the athletic program and the university. Thus, the advisors are caught in the middle of implicit assumptions about how best to help both the students who depend on them and the university to which they have job responsibilities. Developing privacy management training in this context serves an important function to help advisors do their job effectively while helping both student-athletes as well as the college for which they work and to which they have obligations.

The present study may also motivate athletic departments to create a comprehensive information management system that guides advisors how to proceed when student-athletes disclose private information to them. Based on the findings of the present study, there are clear recommendations for how the information management system should be set up. First, when advisors receive private information about academic concerns, they should always share that information with a supervisor and/or coach so that both are kept abreast of the student-athletes' situation. Student-athletes should be told that a supervisor and/or coach will be informed about their academic plight so that the student-athletes are not surprised. Second, when advisors receive private information about athletic matters that may compromise the health and safety of the student-athlete, then advisors should, without hesitation,

disclose that information to a representative of the athletic department who can swiftly intervene. The health and well-being of the student-athlete should be of primary concern at all times. Third, when advisors receive private information about personal matters, they should reveal this information as well if a student-athlete is at risk of danger or the student-athlete is threatening to put someone else's life in danger. Revealing is part of an ethical responsibility on the part of the advisor. These are a starting point to creating an information management system designed to assist advisors.

The work in the present study has laid the foundation for future research by drawing attention to communication privacy management in the context of the relationship between advisors and college student-athletes. A direction for future researchers will involve further exploration of communication and being caught in the middle, the loyalty conflicts advisors experience and how, if at all, this translates into relational and job satisfaction. Given that the experience of being caught in the middle and loyalty conflicts is a stressful situation, it is important to understand the implications for advisors. Too much stress may cause them to be dissatisfied on their job. This may result in advisors quitting their job, resulting in a high turnover rate for the profession of academic advising of college student-athletes. This would be a logical next step to explore given the findings of the current study. This and other issues will continue to be explored related to advisors as they work with student-athletes.

#### Notes

[1] Athletic/academic advisors are individuals at a college or university who advise college student-athletes in the academic and student services unit within the department of athletics. In this manuscript, the terms "athletic/academic advisor" and "advisor" will be used synonymously, unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Student-athletes are individuals who are enrolled in college and attending classes while concomitantly participating in their sport. For a more detailed explanation of student-athletes, see Watt & Moore (2001).

[3] Following each of the excerpts from the interviews, participant number and page number(s) of the interview transcript are included.

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**RESEARCH THAT MATTERS!**

## **COMMUNICATION PRIVACY MANAGEMENT IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS: EXPLORING PRIVACY DILEMMAS IN THE ATHLETIC/ACADEMIC ADVISOR STUDENT-ATHLETE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP**

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### **Research Problem**

Over the course of a school year college student-athletes frequently interact with their advisor. It is common for student-athletes to develop a comfortable rapport with their advisor, and this is evident in the private information they disclose to the advisor pertaining to various issues (e.g., academic issues, athletic issues, personal issues) they regularly contend with. The purpose of this paper is to examine the uncertainties athletic/academic advisors encounter when managing private information disclosed to them from student-athletes. At times the decision about how to handle the information from student-athletes may not be simple because advisors find themselves juggling multiple relationships with student-athletes, parents, coaches, and others.

This research is significant for a couple of reasons. First, the decisions advisors make as they manage student-athletes' private information have significant ramifications for student-athletes, the athletic department, and the institution as a whole. Therefore, a complete understanding of this issue is warranted. Second, this study has an applied nature as the information can be used to educate and inform future advisors who plan to work with college student-athletes. In this way, future advisors will be better informed about their position and will learn from the experiences described by other advisors as they have managed private information from student-athletes. Put differently, future advisors may glean some information from this study that helps them become more effective advisors.

This article would likely be pertinent to intercollegiate athletics department personnel. More specifically, the information would be useful to those in the athletics department who work directly in the area of advising student-athletes. All parties would want to read this study given that the department of athletics is usually interdependent. Put another way, the decisions made by a few affect the working environment of all. In the present study, the decisions and experiences of advisors affect the entire athletic department.

### **Issues**

Few interpersonal relationships are more salient on college campuses than that between athletic/academic advisors and student-athletes. Student-athletes frequently meet with their advisors, and during these interactions, advisors listen to student-athletes' concerns, offering advice which helps them navigate their academic and athletic journeys. Not surprisingly, over the course of these interactions, it is common for them to develop a very meaningful relationship given the tremendous influence of advisors. Many student-athletes feel comfortable with their advisor, and this is evident in the private information they disclose to the advisor concerning issues they regularly deal with.

Some of these issues include balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, struggling with learning disabilities, handling the close scrutiny of the media, and maintaining relationships with friends and family. These issues also encompass student-athletes having difficult relationships with their coaches, making them consider transferring to a different university.

When advisors receive private information from student-athletes pertaining to any of the aforementioned issues as confidants they may find themselves trying to decide what to reveal to others and what to conceal from others. Advisors face this decision because they maintain relationships with not only student-athletes, but also with coaches, parents, athletic administrators, and faculty members. For example, a student-athlete may disclose some private information to an advisor regarding the dissatisfaction the student-athlete has with the way the coach is treating him/her. Further, the dissatisfaction is causing the student-athlete to consider leaving the institution. Subsequent to receiving this disclosure, the advisor has to choose whether or not to disclose that information to the student-athlete's coach as this situation patently affects the coach's team. At first glance, it may appear this decision is relatively straightforward. However, this matter is substantially more complicated than it appears given that it is common for confidants to experience the difficulty of being caught in the middle between persons after receiving private information. The difficulty mainly lies in the dual loyalty conflicts experienced by the person caught in the middle. In the aforementioned example, subsequent receiving the private information from the student-athlete pertaining to being dissatisfied, the advisor is caught in the middle between the student-athlete and the coach. The advisor is caught in this position as he or she tries to decide what to do. The objective of this study is to learn more about the experiences of advisors as they navigate this process.

I was motivated to complete this research because many advisors have shared with me the dilemmas and discomfort they've experienced in the process of trying to decide what to do with information disclosed to them from student-athletes. They've shared being frustrated and without firm guidance in the midst of trying to decide what to do. As a result, I felt compelled to make better sense of the experience of advisors in effort to see if recommendations could be made to help make better their experience.

## Summary

This study mainly found that advisors experienced different types of dilemmas while trying to decide how to manage private information disclosed to them from student-athletes. In other words, advisors were at times uncertain how to proceed when student-athletes disclosed to them information about certain matters. For example, advisors experienced dilemmas when student-athletes disclosed to them certain things pertaining to academic issues (e.g., student-athletes engaging in academic integrity issues such as cheating). Further, advisors experienced dilemmas when student-athletes disclosed to them about certain athletic issues (e.g., the desire to transfer to another institution and experiencing athletic injuries). Lastly, advisors experienced dilemmas when student-athletes disclosed to them about certain personal issues (e.g., personal health and wellness and family pressure).

When advisors received disclosures from student-athletes regarding the aforementioned range of issues, I discovered that the main reason they experienced uncertainty about how to proceed was based on being caught in the middle between the student-athletes and the another person (e.g., coach). Therefore, the advisor was trying to decide whether or not to reveal to someone else that which the student-athlete disclosed. This spurred a significant loyalty conflict on the part of the advisor. Interestingly, the advisors cited no clear guidelines that directed them how to proceed in each instance. Thus, experiencing dilemmas was a common occurrence.

## Analysis

Based on the results of the present study, I argue that athletic organizations need to develop a complete set of unambiguous guidelines which are designed to help advisors avoid moments of being unsure how to manage private information disclosed to them from student-athletes. That's the bottom line. This is critical because uncertainty can lead to dire consequences. In my study an advisor reported that he was unsure whether or not to inform a faculty member about a student-athlete who disclosed to him (i.e., advisor) about cheating on a class assignment. Also, in my study an advisor reported that he was unsure whether or not to inform athletic administrative personnel that a

student-athlete disclosed to him (i.e., advisor) that he was suffering from an injury yet felt compelled to compete despite the injury. I contend that both of these situations signal an enormous red flag in advising student-athletes. Advisors should never be unsure in either of these situations. Instead, advisors should possess an unequivocal set of administered guidelines that direct them in knowing the proper protocol for how to handle the various situations they may encounter. They also need to know how to proceed in the event that a situation they come across goes beyond the scope of the guidelines they were provided. If advisors are not given this critical information, then it is likely that some will continue to experience dilemmas when student-athletes disclose private information to them.

It is in the best interest of athletic organizations to help advisors avoid uncertainty while making important decisions in their work with student-athletes so that they can avoid inauspicious consequences. All advisors, particularly those who are novice advisors, need to be provided with these guidelines and also be properly trained. It is important that attention be called to this issue. My study raises awareness and encourages academic/athletic advising units to make sure an information management system is set in place for advisors as they interact with student-athletes.

## **Discussions/Implications**

I argue that the findings of the present study, from an applied or translational research standpoint, can be translated into practice. Petronio (2007) argued that it is the responsibility of researchers to develop pragmatic and innovative ways to translate their research into practice and hence the research may benefit others outside of the confines of the researcher's particular academic community. The findings of the present study will be used to produce the training manuals for training sessions aimed at providing novice and veteran advisors with useful strategies to handle difficult situations. With the proper training, novice and veteran advisors will be equipped with knowledge that will help them handle situations when they are experiencing a dilemma. The knowledge will give them guidance regarding how to handle the situation and make the proper decisions. They will be confident that the decisions they make are underwritten by departmental policies and procedures. Adequate training may also enable advisors to avert making ill-advised decisions which may result in damaging the student-athlete, the athletic department, or the university. This type of training is best designed to utilize case studies where the advisors are guided in learning how to handle dilemmas when student-athletes share with them certain private information, come to an understanding of the kind of privacy orientation the advisors might have, and analyze the implicit expectations that the college has for managing information of a personal nature.