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The Role of Public Relations in College Athletics

Identifying Roles, Tasks, and Importance of Public Relations

Brody J. Ruihley
Angela N. Pratt
Tiffany Carpenter

Abstract

Public relations (PR) is becoming increasingly important in college athletics as the frequency and severity of controversy, legal issues, and crises heighten. With many stakeholders concerned about college athletic programs, coupled with an increased media presence and skyrocketing budgets, it is imperative that athletic programs communicate effectively and efficiently in times where clarity is needed. With that, the purpose of this research is to continue learning about the roles and perceptions of PR within an athletic department, as seen through the lens of athletic directors. Building on the work of (Ruihley & Fall, 2009), this research seeks to discover more about the following PR areas: tasks, stakeholder reach, benefits, and roles of PR staff. With mixed-method findings from NCAA Divisions I-A and I-AA athletic directors ($n = 49$), results indicate top responsibilities of the primary PR staff member as maintaining media contacts and working with coaches and athletes. The top stakeholders indicated were student athletes, media, and the university. The top perceived role was problem-solving process facilitator. Lastly, the top indicated benefits of PR were identified in themes of communication and message, relationships, and strategic planning. The results of this research assist in understanding more about the fit of PR in college athletics.

Keywords: *public relations; roles; athletic director; college athletics; PR in college athletics*

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Introduction

Intercollegiate athletics in the United States is an industrial context ripe for public relations (PR) research. PR research within the context of intercollegiate athletics is important and valuable because of its ability to shape and be shaped by communities, institutions, and industries (e.g., Lawrence, Ott, & Hendricks, 2009; Martinez, Stinson, Kang, & Jubenville, 2010). At its highest financial and competitive level, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I programs command immediate attention from journalists, fans, community members, media outlets, scholars, sponsoring corporations and government entities (Clark, Apostolopoulou, Branvold, & Synowka, 2009; Hechinger, 2009). With continued expansion of social media, 24/7 news cycles, and constant churning of the rumor mill, it is increasingly important to convey information in a precise and timely manner. Understanding the role of PR personnel in the intercollegiate athletics environment is a relevant area for research, considering its popularity, the financial implications of (and for) its stakeholders, and its potential for crisis (e.g., Barnett, 2008). Recent controversies—including alleged sexual assault by student athletes, abuse of student athletes by coaches, and widespread academic fraud by athletics administrators—have garnered tremendous attention from media (Eder & Zernike, 2013; Lyall, 2014; Spousta, 2014). When an incident occurs, it not only has a negative impact on the athletic department, but on the institution as well, posing a serious threat to the integrity of both entities in the eyes of their stakeholders, and therefore necessitates responses that address relational and reputational concerns. Traditionally, athletic departments have used sports information departments to manage the day-to-day media for sports teams; however, PR provides a new dimension to communications from an athletic department. A true PR mindset would expand those roles to think more strategically about communications and message, to stay ahead of the media cycle, and to communicate effectively and efficiently with all stakeholders.

Information on the status of PR and PR activities in college athletics is important and will help serve athletic departments in strategy and assessment of department vision, mission, staff, and in many cases, much needed critical and timely response. In addition, the communication landscape is constantly changing and reexamining the PR specialists in the college athletic environment by identifying trends and patterns. With that, the purpose of this research is to continue learning more about the roles and perceptions of PR within an athletic department, as seen through the lens of athletic directors. Building on the work of (Author, 2009), this research is guided by the aspiration to understand more about athletic directors' perceptions of the following PR dimensions: tasks, stakeholder reach, benefits, and roles of PR staff.

Literature Review

Definition of PR

Defining PR has been a decades-long process, evolving from a combination of industry development and academic research (Gower, 2006; Heath, 2006). The understandings of the field employed by scholars in their work today span a variety of theoretical perspectives (Gower, 2006).

The definition of PR used to guide the current study most closely matches functionalist theoretical perspectives, namely systems theory, excellence theory, relationship management, and integrated marketing communications (IMC). J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed a perspective of PR based on the idea of organizations being either open systems—in which communication is free-flowing, responsive, and transparent to publics—and closed systems, which are the opposite. J. Grunig furthered this perspective in the development of the “excellence theory” of PR with L. Grunig, which held that PR is a management function, and the most successful organizations practice two-way symmetrical communication (J. Grunig, 2006; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1989, 2000). Relationship management is similar to excellence theory. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined PR in terms of the organization-public relationship (OPR). An OPR comes into existence when an organization and its strategic publics become interdependent, and therefore must constantly manage the consequences of their actions on one another (Hung, 2005).

Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn (1993) introduced the concept of integrated marketing communications (IMC), a perspective merging PR objectives with marketing and advertising objectives, which work together to accomplish organizational goals and interact with publics who can impact those goals. Contemporary communication technologies (e.g., Internet, social networking, video and audio availability) have advanced this theory’s adoption among many scholars and practitioners (Kitchen, Kim, & Schultz, 2008; Schultz & Patti, 2009). One benefit (or curse) of IMC and contemporary technology is that companies have the opportunity (or burden) to align online and offline marketing strategies to reach the appropriate audience (Olenski, 2008).

PR Roles in Intercollegiate Athletics

The concept of PR roles has been emphasized most in systems-oriented research (Dozier, 1992). In general, PR roles have been studied in terms of technical skills, management practices, and leadership (e.g., Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). Technician roles are tactics-oriented, such as writing press releases, arranging/conducting interviews, maintaining websites, and producing video content (e.g., Ekachai, 1995; McCleneghan, 1995). Management roles, on the other hand, are strategy-oriented, such as communication counseling for senior administration, developing internal and external messaging, image construction, reputation maintenance, or reaching out to/solving

problems with publics (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Fortunato, 2008; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). Leadership has been identified as an important area of PR role research, as it ties into how PR is practiced and valued within organizations and among executives (Choi & Choi, 2008; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009).

In intercollegiate athletics contexts, PR research has largely focused on the personnel who demonstrate/occupy those PR roles and the characteristics of those individuals. However, few studies focus on tying those personnel directly to roles, with the exception of some management vs. technician distinctions in job duties and perceptions. For instance, some scholars have examined sports information directors (SIDs), traditionally considered the PR arm of college athletic departments (Hardin & McClung, 2002). McCleneghan (1995) surveyed 95 SIDs about their positions, including demographics and job responsibilities. His assessment was that their PR roles were more technician-like in nature than management. Hardin and McClung (2002) surveyed SIDs about their demographics, duties and advice they would offer to those interested in their profession, but did not focus on PR roles, as defined in the aforementioned PR literature. Neupauer (1998) interviewed female SIDs to learn about their perceptions of their career experiences as women in a male-dominated field, but not their PR roles specifically. Stoldt, Miller, and Comfort (2001) surveyed ADs about their attitudes toward SIDs to learn the perceived value of the SID position within athletics departments.

However, SIDs are not the only intercollegiate athletics personnel studied in regard to PR roles and perceptions. More recently, scholars have also examined ADs, as well as associate ADs for communication, external affairs, marketing and promotions, fund-raising, branding, and management focus (Fortunato, 2008; Pratt, 2013; Ruihley & Fall, 2009). These examinations, such as Pratt (2013), also researched NCAA Division I ADs' understanding of PR in the context of their own athletic departments. In that study, 12 ADs interviewed understood PR as integrated impression management: image, message, and action/interaction with publics (Pratt, 2013).

Ruihley and Fall (2009) took an empirical approach and surveyed NCAA Division I ADs to gain statistical evidence for ADs' views on PR. Results from 99 respondents showed that 63% reported having an employee whose job centered on PR, and only 14% identified those positions as having "sports information" in their titles (Ruihley & Fall, 2009). ADs in this study also indicated that among various PR roles, they most often identified their top PR officer with that of "problemsolving process facilitator" (Ruihley & Fall, 2009, p. 408). When compared to past research, these findings suggested that the perception of PR in athletics departments is changing from technician-centered to management-centered.

As the communications industry and technology changes, ADs' (and their employees') concerns, issues, and distribution of roles and responsibilities change as well. Changes, for example, have come from the 24-hour TV and Internet news

cycle, the development of websites, and the rise of social media (Hardin & McClung, 2002; Sanderson, 2011; Stoldt, 2012). In addition, university presidents are, willingly or not, taking a more active role in managing athletic departments (Lederman, Kiley, & Jaschik, 2012). This might affect ADs when their departments' PR approaches differ from their universities' approaches (Hoffman, 2013). These emerging issues tie into the popularity, financial implications, and potential for crisis within collegiate athletics, all of which serves to underscore the importance of studying how the CEOs of this industrial context—ADs—perceive PR and the roles of their PR personnel.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The primary purpose of this research is to further understand the perceptions and roles of PR in collegiate athletics departments by examining their chief executives, ADs. Along with this purpose, comparison to past research will be addressed to determine what changes, if any, have occurred. Finally, this research aims to add benchmarks to PR literature in general, as well as in sport and in intercollegiate athletics. In order to accomplish these purposes, this study will seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ¹: What are the perceptions of the athletic directors regarding the top PR officer's ability to complete PR tasks?

RQ²: What are the perceptions of the athletic directors regarding the top PR officer's relationship with top athletic department stakeholders?

RQ³: What do the athletic directors believe are the top benefits of PR within a college athletic department?

RQ⁴: What PR role(s) do the athletic directors indicate that top PR officials occupying within the structure of a college athletic department?

Method

Primary data were used to answer each of the research questions guiding this research. Responses were obtained from NCAA Division I ADs by means of an online questionnaire. The sample, instrument, procedure, and analyses are covered in the following section.

Sample

NCAA Division I-A and I-AA ADs were the target for this research. Contact information for this population was gathered, first, by obtaining a list of NCAA member institutions through the NCAA's website. The researchers searched and acquired ADs' e-mail addresses from staff directories of each athletic department's website or corresponding university directory. The NCAA directory of Division

I institutions contained 333 competing Division I schools, which served as the sample for the study.

Instrument

The instrument was based on the work conducted by Ruihley and Fall (2009) and also drew from research conducted by Stoldt et al. (2001). Variables corresponding with the previous two citations are as follows: title of athletic department's top PR officer, frequency of top PR officer is in senior-staff meetings, and ability of top PR officer to perform PR tasks. Performance of tasks was measured by listing a PR task that required the AD to identify the performance utilizing a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*).

Utilizing prior research as a foundation for examining PR roles (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1992; Ekachai, 1995; Ruihley & Fall, 2009), this research analyzed the following major roles: expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator, and communication technician. *Expert prescribers* are "responsible for designing a PR program as well as for diagnosing PR problems and prescribing solutions to them" (Ekachai, 1995, p. 329). *Communication facilitators* mediate information between an organization and key stakeholders. *Problem-solving process facilitators* "help an organization identify and solve its problems through a systematic problem-solving process" (p. 329); and communication technicians use computer skills, design, graphics, photography, writing, and other skills to produce materials assisting in a PR program (Ruihley & Fall, 2009).

PR role scale items were identical to those in Ruihley and Fall (2009), originally modified from Dozier (1992) and Ekachai (1995) (See Table 1). To measure PR roles, ADs were instructed to rate their agreement or disagreement, via a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), when presented with statements about the role their top PR officer occupies. Descriptive information was gathered utilizing open-ended questions including: number of full-time employees in the athletic department, number of full-time PR-only employees, and number of students enrolled at the institution. Further questions asked the number of years participants had been an ADs, and their gender.

Administrative Procedures and Analyses

The questionnaire was dispersed to the purposive sample of Division I ADs using a three-step process including an initial email sent inviting participants to the research; the message contained a hyperlink to the online questionnaire hosted by Google Documents. Two follow-up emails served as reminders. Once completed, respondents' data were anonymously stored in an online database.

Data were analyzed using SPSS 22. Descriptive and frequency statistics were gathered. Paired sample t-tests were utilized in comparing PR roles. Additionally, independent samples tests were used to analyze mean differences between the current data and Ruihley and Fall (2009) data regarding AD perceptions of PR offi-

Table 1
Scale Items for PR Role Factors

Role	Scale Items	Alpha Coefficient / α
Expert Prescriber	• He/she diagnoses public relations problems and explains them to others in the organization (expert prescriber). • Because of their experience and training, others consider he/she the organization's expert in solving public relations problems (expert prescriber) • He/she takes responsibility for the success or failure of your organization's public relations program (expert prescriber). • He/she plans and recommends courses of action for solving and/or avoiding public relations problems (expert prescriber). • He/she makes communication policy decisions (expert prescriber). • He/she is held accountable for the success or failure of public relations programs (expert prescriber).	.826
Communication Facilitator	• He/she conducts communication audits to identify communication problems between the organization and various publics (communication facilitator). • He/she creates opportunities for management to hear the views of various internal and external publics (communication facilitator). • He/she keeps management informed of public reactions to organizational policies, procedures, change, and/or actions (communication facilitator) • He/she represents the organization at events and meetings (communication facilitator).	.800

Table 1 (cont.)

Problem-Solving Process Facilitator	• In meetings with management, he/she points out the need to follow a systematic public relations planning process (problem-solving process facilitator). • He/she encourages management participation when making important public relations decisions (problem-solving process facilitator). • He/she keeps management actively involved in every phase of the public relations program (problem-solving process facilitator). • He/she works with managers to increase their skills in solving and/or avoiding public relations problems (problem-solving facilitator). • When working with managers on public relations, he/she outlines alternative approaches for solving problems (problem-solving facilitator).	.852
Communication Technician	• He/she is the person who writes the public relations materials presenting on information on issues important to the organization (communication technician) • He/she maintains media contacts and places press releases (communication technician) • He/she produces brochures, pamphlets, and other publications (communication technician). • He/she does photography and graphics for public relations materials (communication technician). • He/she handles the technical aspects of producing public relations materials (communication technician).	.693

cers' roles, ability of PR officers to complete PR tasks, and PR officers' relationship with stakeholder groups. To examine the qualitative, open-ended comments from the ADs, a thematic analysis was conducted by two of the three authors of this research. Coding followed Creswell's (2007) outline of open, axial, and selective coding procedures. Open coding identifies common areas between participant responses and sections those common areas into "categories of information" (p. 239–240). Axial coding determines themes shared between participant responses. Selective coding "takes the central phenomenon and systematically relates it to other categories, validating the relationships and filling in categories that need further refinement and developments" (p. 240; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Researchers organized the open-ended data into an Excel worksheet for coding. Participant responses were thoroughly examined by the researchers to ensure the researchers were immersed and focused on the data (Wolcott, 1994). Next, data were coded and emerging themes from responses identified. Themes emerged from the repeated use of words, identification of keywords, and the discussion by the participants about the topic of PR (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Comparative analysis was conducted by the researchers and agreements were reached. If discrepancies in the coding were found, a third investigator would have been employed to reach agreement (Creswell, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2000). There were no discrepancies and a third member was not needed.

To address coding trustworthiness for this section of the data, several strategies were utilized. First, to address credibility (e.g., internal validity), comparative analysis was utilized. With this, participant comments to open-ended inquiry were classified and sorted into specific themes. Second, thick descriptions of comments were used to ensure the meaning of participants' responses corresponded with the investigators' codes. The research did not employ word-finding software. This strategy is called transferability (external validity) (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Third, the researchers read and reread data to ensure the data were dependable (and reliable). Finally, confirmability (objectivity) was based on the ability of the researchers to limit bias and premature conclusions by utilizing the aforementioned steps (Erlandson et al., 1993; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Wolcott, 1994). Through these coding procedures, participant responses were sorted into six identifiable themes.

Results

Profile of Respondents

A total of 333 questionnaires were sent to NCAA Division I ADs. Of these, 49 surveys were anonymously completed, resulting in a response rate of 15% for the entire population. Participant data revealed 95.9% of respondents were male, the average AD experience was 9.8 years (ranging from 1 year to 30 years), and respondents worked for universities with an average enrollment of 14,670 students. Average department size was 105 full-time employees (ranging from 22 to 325

employees). When examining titles of the top PR officer in the athletic department, top titles contained the identifiers media relations (30.6%), athletic director (24.5%), and communication (22.4%). See Table 2 for further demographic information.

Table 2
Sample Descriptive Statistics (n = 49 athletic directors)

Descriptive Statistics	n	%
Gender		
Male	47	95.9%
Female	2	4.1%
Years as AD		
1-5 years	18	36.7%
6-10 years	15	30.6%
11-15 years	5	10.2%
16-20 years	5	10.2%
21-30 years	6	12.2%
Number of Full-time Employees		
20-60 employees	13	26.5%
61-119 employees	19	38.8%
120+ employees	17	34.7%
PR Officer in Senior Staff Meetings		
Not in meetings	2	4.1%
1-25% of meetings	1	2.0%
26-50% of meetings	1	2.0%
51-75% of meetings	4	8.2%
76-99% of meetings	4	8.2%
100% of meetings	37	75.5%
Number of PR-Focused Employees		
0 employees	2	4.1%
1-5 employees	34	69.4%
6-10 employees	9	18.4%
11-15 employees	3	6.1%
16-20 employees	1	2.0%

Specifically focusing on PR, 33 (67.3%) ADs indicated having a person solely devoted to PR. When asked how many employees work on PR activities, an average of four people were identified (ranging from zero to 20 employees). Lastly, ADs indicated their top PR officer was involved, on average, in 89.8% of senior staff meetings (75.5% included in 100% of meetings).

Addressing Research Questions

Research Question 1. RQ¹ involved ADs rating their top PR officer's ability to perform various PR tasks (5-point Likert-type scale: 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*). The highest mean scores were as follows: maintaining media contacts ($\mu = 4.43$), working with coaches and athletes ($\mu = 4.38$), developing and managing a budget ($\mu = 4.22$), recommending responses to issues ($\mu = 4.20$), and advising on PR issues ($\mu = 4.18$). The lowest mean scores were as follows: coordinating special events ($\mu = 3.61$), setting PR goals ($\mu = 3.45$), and conducting PR research ($\mu = 3.31$).

Comparing the results to Ruiehley and Fall (2009), the top two PR functions were the same with differing order, the remaining PR tasks did not move more than two spots in rank, with the exception of developing and managing a budget (from eleventh to third ranking) and setting PR goals (from thirteenth to tenth rank). Please see Table 3 for complete list of PR tasks and comparison data.

Research Question 2. The results for RQ² indicate that ADs perceive their top PR officer's relationship to be the best with the following five stakeholder groups: student athletes ($\mu = 4.27$), media ($\mu = 4.20$), university ($\mu = 4.00$), employees ($\mu = 3.98$), and boosters ($\mu = 3.96$). The lowest four mean scores included stakeholder groups consisting of community ($\mu = 3.88$) parents ($\mu = 3.67$), general university students ($\mu = 3.65$), and alumni ($\mu = 3.65$).

When comparing these findings to Ruiehley and Fall (2009), the top stakeholder group (i.e., student athletes) was the same for both time periods, the top six were the same with one stakeholder group differing in order (media moving from fifth-rank to second-rank), and the bottom three stakeholder groups were the same with differing order. Please see Table 4 for stakeholder group information between the two time periods.

Research Question 3. RQ³ inquired about the benefits received from their PR staff. With open-ended data from 37 participants, applying more than one code per response (if needed), the data produced 83 codes of information. These codes produced six themes. The first theme was titled *Communication and Message* ($n = 25$ codes, 30.12% of all codes). This theme comprised categories of communication activities, message management, marketing, social media, and exposure. A participant comment in this theme highlights the communication and message activities: "Three years ago, athletic communications launched a 'Daily Edition' of [College Website] that provides in-depth coverage of all...varsity sports. More than 200 different episodes have been produced each year." Another participant added that a benefit was, "increased awareness of positive stories coming from our student-athletes."

Table 3
Independent Samples T-Test of Athletic Directors’ Perceptions of Top PR Officer’s Ability to Complete PR Tasks (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)

PR Functions	2014 Avg.	2014 Rank	2009 Avg.	2009 Rank	Rank Change	Mean Change	Signif.
Maintain media contacts	4.43	1	4.27	2	+1	+0.16	<i>p</i> =.251
Work with coaches and athletes	4.37	2	4.29	1	-1	+0.08	<i>p</i> =.545
Develop and manage a budget	4.22	3	3.87	11	+8	+0.35	<i>p</i> =.014
Recommend responses to issues	4.20	4	4.24	3	-1	-0.04	<i>p</i> =.767
Advise on PR issues	4.18	5	4.19	4	-1	-0.01	<i>p</i> =.953
Manage PR issues	4.14	6	4.19	5	-1	-0.05	<i>p</i> =.723
Manage Social Media ^a	4.14						
Produce PR material	4.12	7	4.11	7		+0.02	<i>p</i> =.935
Evaluate PR issues	4.04	8	4.14	6	-2	-0.10	<i>p</i> =.459
Contribute to policy decisions	3.98	9	4.08	8	-1	-0.10	<i>p</i> =.447
Identify emerging issues	3.76	10	3.99	9	-1	-0.23	<i>p</i> =.160
Mediate conflicts	3.65	11	3.83	12	+1	-0.18	<i>p</i> =.302
Coordinate special events	3.61	12	3.82	13	+1	-0.21	<i>p</i> =.207
Set PR goals	3.45	13	3.90	10	-3	-0.45	<i>p</i> =.005
Conduct PR research	3.31	14	3.51	14		-0.20	<i>p</i> =.265

^a Added in the 2014 research

Table 4

Comparison of Athletic Directors' Perceptions of Top PR Officer's Relationship with Key Stakeholders (1 = Poor to 5 = Excellent), $M \pm SD$

Stakeholders	2014 $M \pm SD$	2014 Rank	2009 $M \pm SD$ ^a	2009 Rank ^a	Rank Change	Mean Change
Student Athletes	4.27 $\pm$ 0.60	1	4.23 $\pm$ 0.59	1	-	+0.04
Media	4.02 $\pm$ 0.72	2	3.92 $\pm$ 0.83	5	+3	+0.10
University	4.00 $\pm$ 0.82	3	4.07 $\pm$ 0.76	2	-1	-0.07
Employees	3.98 $\pm$ 0.69	4	4.03 $\pm$ 0.62	3	-1	-0.05
Boosters	3.96 $\pm$ 0.82	5	4.03 $\pm$ 0.68	4	-1	-0.07
Community	3.88 $\pm$ 0.78	6	3.79 $\pm$ 0.84	6	-	+0.09
Parents	3.67 $\pm$ 0.72	7	3.75 $\pm$ 0.68	8	+1	-0.08
Students	3.65 $\pm$ 0.81	8	3.74 $\pm$ 0.73	9	+1	-0.09
Alumni	3.65 $\pm$ 0.81	9	3.76 $\pm$ 0.77	7	-2	-0.09

Note: No significant differences were found between the yearly differences utilizing independent samples t-test.

^a From Ruibley and Fall (2009)

The second theme, *Relationships* ($n = 23$, 27.71%), focused on the relationships an athletic department has with several stakeholder groups. These groups included: media, community, university, alumni, coach, student athlete, and fans. One comment stated that a benefit was producing "a great working relationship with local media members and community members," while another stated that a benefit was having "better community and alumni awareness." The third theme, titled *Strategic Planning* ($n = 14$, 16.87%), contained content categories of proactive preparation and vision management. One benefit mentioned was an "increased awareness about the issues facing the athletics department." Another comment discussed having "more educated and informed coaches and staff."

The fourth theme, *Public Perception of Program* ($n = 9$, 10.84%), dealt with image, perception, and credibility of an athletic department. One comment simply stated that a benefit of PR activities was having "accurate public perception." The fifth theme, *Other* ($n = 9$, 10.84%), comprised content categories of attendance, student award distribution, environment, execution of plans, historic perspective, radio management, research, and revenue generation. The sixth and final theme, *Crisis Management* ($n = 3$, 3.61%), involved reactionary leadership in times of turmoil. One comment stated that a benefit of the PR staff is having someone to "help me navigate difficult situations." For a complete list of themes and content categories, see Table 5.

Table 5*Athletic Directors' Qualitative Perceptions of the Benefits of PR Staff*

Theme/Categories	<i>n</i>	Percent of Codes
Communication and Message	25	30.12%
Communication Activities	10	12.05%
Message Management	9	10.84%
Marketing	3	3.61%
Social Media	2	2.41%
Exposure	1	1.20%
Relationships	23	27.71%
Media Relations	9	10.84%
Community Relations	5	6.02%
University Relations	2	2.41%
Alumni Relations	2	2.41%
Coach and Student Athlete	2	2.41%
General Relations	2	2.41%
Fan Relations	1	1.20%
Strategic Planning	14	16.87%
Proactive Preparation	10	12.05%
Vision Management	4	4.82%
Public Perception of Program	9	10.84%
Other	9	10.84%
Attendance	2	2.41%
Student Award Distribution	1	1.20%
Environment	1	1.20%
Execution	1	1.20%
Historic Perspective	1	1.20%
Radio Management	1	1.20%
Research	1	1.20%
Revenue Generation	1	1.20%
Crisis Management	3	3.61%
Total	83	100.00%

Research Question 4. RQ⁴ revolved around the role(s) PR plays within an athletic department. This question simply asked what PR role(s) do top PR officers occupy within the structure of a college athletic department. Results of a paired sample *t*-test show the top role mean average belonging to Problem-Solving Process Facilitator ($\mu = 3.95$), followed by Communication Technician ($\mu = 3.90$), Expert Prescriber ($\mu = 3.84$), and Communication Facilitator ($\mu = 3.79$). Differences between each of the pairs are highlighted below:

- Problem-Solving Process Facilitator and Communication Technician ($p = .734$)
- Problem-Solving Process Facilitator and Expert Prescriber ($p = .013$)
- Problem-Solving Process Facilitator and Communication Facilitator ($p = .096$)
- Communication Technician and Expert Prescriber ($p = .407$)
- Communication Technician and Communication Facilitator ($p = .619$)
- Expert Prescriber and Communication Facilitator ($p = .437$)

When comparing the results of this research and the work of Ruiehley and Fall (2009), the ranking of the top two roles stayed the same: first, problem-solving process facilitator; second, communication technician. Expert prescriber moved from fourth-ranked in 2009 to third-ranked in the current research. Conversely, communication facilitator went from third-ranked in 2009 to fourth ranked in the current findings. An independent samples *t*-test was also administered to determine significant mean difference between the two samples. No significant differences were found. Please see Table 6 for role information between the two time periods.

Table 6

Independent Samples T-test of Athletic Directors' Perceptions of the Top PR Officer's Role (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), $M \pm SD$

PR Role	2014 ($n = 49$)	2014 Rank	2009 ^a ($n = 97$)	2009 Rank ^a	Mean Change	Signif.
Expert Prescriber	3.79 ± 0.65	4	3.87 ± 0.69	3	-0.08	$p=0.500$
Problem-Solving Process Facilitator	3.95 ± 0.66	1	3.99 ± 0.68	1	-0.04	$p=0.741$
Communication Facilitator	3.84 ± 0.60	3	3.76 ± 0.68	4	+0.08	$p=0.494$
Communication Technician	3.90 ± 0.67	2	3.97 ± 0.81	2	-0.07	$p=0.599$

^a From Ruiehley and Fall (2009)

Discussion

The results of this study assist in updating information on the current landscape of PR in college athletics. As stated in the conceptual framework, PR research has reinforced the concept of associating management roles of PR officers with power and influence in their organizations (e.g., Dozier & Broom, 1995; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). Recent alterations to PR definitions (such as that of PRSA) and the growth of perspectives such as IMC indicate that the scope of PR is changing and growing (e.g., Public Relations Society of America, 2012; Schultz & Patti, 2009). Many results from this study coincide with these aspects of current PR scholarship. These results provided an update to perceptions, benefits, important tasks, and apply roles to practical and academic fields of college athletic PR. In addition, while not a true replication, comparative analyses with Ruiehley and Fall (2009) provide a perspective of change over time. The following sections of this discussion will highlight some of the key findings of each set of research questions, address any noteworthy comparison to Ruiehley and Fall (2009), provide a practical call to action, and note areas of limitations and future research.

Research Question Discussion

The set of research questions for RQ¹ focused on PR officers' tasks and performance, as perceived by ADs. The results showed ADs perceiving their top PR officers as best handling coaches, athletes, media contacts, and PR issues. These findings drew similar conclusions to Ruiehley and Fall (2009), with the top-rated tasks ranking in comparable fashion (as seen in Table 2). These are all important issues, as one can deduce from the task labels. Athletes and coaches are the sport product and the media shares information about the product (Carson & Rinehart, 2010). PR issues surrounding the product, highlighted and scrutinized by the media, need to be dealt with in order to protect the brand of a university and athletics program, especially with many programs operating with a budget near to or more than \$100 million (Ruihley & Fall, 2009).

The key finding in this section came, when comparing to previous research (Ruihley & Fall, 2009), with the mean increase in the task of *develop and manage a budget* (+0.35 out of 5.0) and the drastic mean decrease in *set PR goals* (-0.45 out of 5.0). On the surface, managing a budget seems appropriate considering this athletic landscape of large budgets and financially failing programs, as Fulks (2013) reported, only 23 NCAA member programs as having positive net generated revenue. With these findings, it makes sense that managing a budget would be rated higher and given more attention by ADs. The increase in managing a budget's importance also corresponds with the greater frequency of *athletic director* as an identifier for the top PR officer. That identifier carries an official leadership capacity with it in an athletic department, which almost always involves the management of financial resources, whether for the whole or individual department. Further, PR scholarship has associated control of financial resources with

organizational power and influence (e.g., Dozier & Broom, 1995; J. Grunig, 2006; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2000).

On the decreasing side of tasks, *set PR goals* fell substantially from its level in the Ruibley and Fall (2009) study. A possible explanation for this finding could be a result of the enormity of advising, managing, and evaluating PR issues; all rated at least 0.59 (out of 5.0) higher than setting those goals. Creating a PR plan can easily take a backseat when an athletic department is dealing with issues that need immediate resolve. In today's world of 24/7 news coverage, social media, and increased scrutiny, issues can flare up at any time and need to be addressed quickly, which can place long-term strategic planning on the back-burner.

The results for the RQ² set give importance to the key stakeholders of the media and student athletes. Communicating with these groups is especially important with the expansion of social media. Specifically, Twitter makes PR officers an even more crucial first line of response/defense when crises, leaked information, or rumors spread in an instant through media channels (or when athletes and coaches take to the Internet themselves). Off-mainstream websites and blogs (e.g., *Deadspin* and *Sportsgrid*) are gaining credibility, not just notoriety, with readers, media members, and administrators. This adds yet another layer of media for PR officials to track, court, and respond to (e.g., Sanderson, 2011).

Results of RQ² show stakeholder groups of students and alumni as having the lowest perceived relationship when compared to the other groups. This is not entirely surprising, considering that marketing and development officers often reach these groups (Martin, Miller, Elsis, Bowers, & Hall, 2011). However, PR officers also should reach out to students and alumni through a variety of platforms, from using social media to keep them in the know about their favorite programs, to using traditional mass media, letters, and face-to-face meetings to make sure they understand the athletic department's perspective in crisis situations or controversial decisions (Sung & Yang, 2009). In addition, many fans—particularly students—are being priced out of Division I sports and/or are choosing to stay home to consume games (New, 2014). By engaging students and alumni, athletic departments can cultivate relationships that will further the effort in building a supportive stakeholder base (Linville, McGee, & Hicks, 2012; Sung & Yang, 2009).

RQ³ examined benefits ADs receive from their PR staff. At the top of the list of themes are benefits involving communication and message. This is consistent with prior studies emphasizing the importance of communication from athletic departments to their publics (Fortunato, 2008; Trail & Chelladurai, 2002). It also coincides with research indicating ADs may associate PR with messaging in general (Pratt, 2013).

Another interesting finding from this data was that public perception was identified as a major benefit to having a PR staff. This coincides with the popularity of the "front porch" metaphor among athletics administrators, which is often used to describe the role that a college athletic program plays for its university

and community (Perez, 2011; Ridpath, 2011). If an athletic department does not handle an issue quickly and effectively, it can have a negative influence on the entire institution's reputation. This theme also exemplifies the strong association between PR and image by practitioners and academics alike (Compton, 2014; J. Grunig, 2006). PR-focused individuals benefit their athletic departments by developing strategies to manage difficult situations in a positive manner that addresses athletic, institutional, and stakeholder needs.

RQ⁴ shows ADs' perceptions of the roles of their top PR officer. ADs' responses identified their top PR officer mostly occupying the role of problem-solving process facilitator, followed by communication technician, expert prescriber, and communication facilitator. These results show consistency in PR roles in an athletic department and indicate that there are roles ADs associate so strongly with PR, that the employees who embody those roles are likely considered to be in charge of those roles, as opposed to just occupying them. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why top PR officers are gaining the identifier *athletic director* in their titles: They don't just *perform*, they *manage*. For PR to be effective, they need to be included in senior level meetings to be able to provide more strategic support.

The fact that the role of communication technician is considered the second most important role of a top PR officer (by mean rank) confirms that ADs still expect a certain skill level and task orientation from those whom they would place in charge of their organization's message and image. In addition to performing traditional PR tasks (i.e., setting up press conferences, writing press releases), it is plausible that the expansion of social media is keeping the value of technical skills front of mind for ADs. Executing social media strategy is a skill set that requires fluency with the language of the medium and of the publics who use it, as well as an understanding of how to use that language to connect, inform, and motivate. As the speed and variety of social media increases, so do the responsibilities of those who are expected to implement and respond to its new forms and functions. Therefore, it is important for professionals to understand the technical importance of PR and it is also vital, for those who would aspire to such positions, to acquire those technical skills in addition to developing a strategic problem-solving mindset.

Limitations and Future Research

Studying research questions as they play out over time shows the evolution of roles in industrial contexts; in this case, PR roles in NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics. While this work was able to update portions of Ruihley & Fall's (2009) research, it is not without limitations. The current work has 50 fewer AD participants than the work of Ruihley and Fall (2009). While 49 ADs still represents a 15% response rate of the targeted population, more opinions and input would have added to this research. Hardin, Ruihley, and Veraldo (2013) examined ADs' views on academic research, and found that ADs feel over-researched. Simply put, ADs do not have enough time to complete all survey requests, are unsure

of the legitimacy of the senders and/or studies, and do not respond to random email requests. In part, this could explain the lack of respondents in this study.

It is important to note that other scholars have produced informative investigations with comparable response rates and/or use of Division I ADs. Some examples are: Peachey and Burton (2011), comparative analysis with 51 Division I and 61 Division II ADs; Ryska (2002), comparative analysis with 59 Division I, 63 Division II, and 51 Division III ADs; and Wilson, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sailor (2009), usable surveys from 19.1% of ADs.

A second limitation comes through the use of online surveys. While convenient and easy to administer, this data collection procedure does not allow for follow up to many of the responses. In addition, email requests can be seen as impersonal or less important, perhaps resulting in fewer responses (Hardin, Ruibley, & Veraldo, 2013).

A future research consideration is to repeat this study in the future and compare with the findings of Ruibley and Fall (2009) and this manuscript. Another consideration is to examine PR professionals in intercollegiate athletics and ask how *they* perceive their roles. Responses could be compared to responses of ADs. Further questions might be better suited for one-on-one interviews or focus groups in order to gain more in-depth insight from ADs. For example, where do ADs' perceptions of PR officials come from? What experience has led them to such perceptions? How has collegiate sport PR work evolved over the years?

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