Tangled in a Complex Web of Relationships: Athletic/Academic Advisors Negotiating Privacy Disclosure Warnings With College Student-Athletes

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To investigate privacy management in the relationship between athletic/academic advisors and college student-athletes, I interviewed 37 advisors to address the following questions: What type of privacy rules do student-athletes communicate to advisors? How do advisors manage student-athletes’ private information following these rules? Participants represented 21 different institutions of the 4 NCAA division levels and 10 separate athletic conferences. Findings indicate that student-athletes communicated disclosure warnings regarding academic, athletic, and personal matters, requesting that advisors not inform coaches, parents, and athletic administrative personnel about certain information. In a perpetual balancing act, advisors become tangled in a complex web of relationships with coaches, parents, student-athletes, and others. Practical applications for advisors, along with directions for future research, are considered.


KEY WORDS: advising approaches, college athletics, communication privacy management, disclosure

Irrespective of context, communication forms the core of all interpersonal relationships, and researchers delve into the functionality of communication within such relationships in a salient aspect of understanding (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Knapp & Daly, 2002). To investigate communication in the advising relationship between athletic/academic advisors (hereafter, advisors) and college student-athletes, which occurs on university campuses, I examined the experience of advisors as they handled private information that student-athletes reveal to them concerning academic, athletic, and personal matters. Student-athletes perceive advisors as confidantes and communicate with them frequently concerning private matters (Gruber, 2003; Thomas & Minton, 2004). These conversations commonly take place during academic advising meetings (Bromwell & Gensler, 1997; Gaston-Gales, 2003; Kohler, 1996; Pope & Miller, 1996; Storch & Olson, 2009). After student-athletes reveal private information, advisors must make decisions about whether to reveal or conceal that which student-athletes divulged to them (Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003; Petronio, 2000, 2002; Petronio & Bantz, 1991; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006; Petronio & Gaff, 2010).

At first glance, the choices advisors need to make in the midst of managing student-athletes’ private information seem simple. However, advisors not only maintain relationships with student-athletes, but also with their coaches, parents, athletic administrators, faculty members, athletic trainers, and others in the university community (Meyer, 2005). As a result of this complex web of interaction, competing loyalties emerge (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008), and advisors may find themselves dithering in the face of complicated disclosure decisions. For example, a student-athlete discloses the desire to quit the volleyball team based on both utter dissatisfaction with the head coach and a desire to focus more attention on the academically rigorous pre-med program. After receiving this information, the advisor must determine whether or not to notify the coach about the student-athlete’s situation. The advisor, with a loyalty to both the student-athlete and the coach, also holds a set of expectations about the proper action to take. The advisor may feel compelled to guard the student-athlete’s confidences, but at the same time, fully understand that the coach with this information could more effectively manage the team. The ultimate choice made by the advisor may create unwanted conflict in one of the relationships. This scenario underscores the tremendous complexity of privacy matters while concomitantly calling attention to the inherent difficulty of the advisor’s job.

To date, researchers have not examined privacy management communication in advisor and student-athlete relationships. I take a step to fill this research gap by addressing the participants’ perspectives on this issue while at the same time adding to the robust interdisciplinary literature base and intellectual discussions involving both college student-athletes and advisors.
The advisor and student–athlete relationship warrants particular attention due to the expectations and needs of student-athletes that differ from those of nonathlete students. Therefore, I lay the groundwork for fundamental understanding of the advisor–student-athlete relational context along with information regarding third-party disclosures. Each of these areas is important because, taken together, they further build the foundation for the study.

**The Unique Advisor and Student–Athlete Relationship**

Initially, the context of the advisor and student–athlete relationship seemingly differs little from that of any advisor and student. Clearly athletes and nonathletes share some of the same types of private information because their needs, expectations, and experiences are similar. They may discuss with advisors academic concerns (e.g., curriculum issues or routine issues with a learning disability), experiences with homesickness (Andreatta, 2011), or struggles with tremendous angst prior to taking exams (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995).

Along with these similarities, however, several key needs, expectations, and experiences demarcate the life of student-athletes as unique (Kislinger & Miller, 2009; Parham, 1993; Watt & Moore, 2001). Student-athletes contend with certain pressures, stressors, and challenges that other students do not face, and their unique situation often involves disclosures of specific private information that require scrutiny. For instance, a student-athlete might tell an advisor about experimenting with performance enhancing drugs due to pressures to gain an unfair advantage during competition (Calfee & Fadale, 2006; Green, Uryasz, Petr, & Bray, 2001). A student-athlete may reveal that a sexual advance from an extraordinary power of an assistant coach could not be refused (Monk, 2011). Although nonathletes might share stories of alcohol abuse used to handle stress, the cause of anxiety and subsequent drinking for the student-athlete may involve the glare of the public spotlight during insensitive criticism of a performance failure (Valentine & Taub, 1999), need to cope with the unrelenting demands of two-a-day practice sessions during the off-season, or the six-day-a-week practice schedule during the playing season (Delaney & Madigan, 2009). A student-athlete might reveal feeling dragooned, at the hands of the head coach or an athletic booster, to compete despite suffering from a serious, persistent athletic injury (Fertman, 2008; Hootman, Dick, & Agel, 2007). These challenges relate to their unique experience as competitors.

**The Relational Context of the Advisor and Student-Athlete**

The relationship of the advisor and student-athlete depends on trust and confidentiality because the student-athlete reveals considerable private information to the advisor as part of an advising session (Meyer, 2005; Petronio, 2002). Although many divulge little outside of academic concerns (e.g., grades received on class exams and other assignments) during the early stages of the advisor–advisee relationship, the pair develop trust as they become more acquainted (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1984), and the student-athlete often feels increasingly comfortable sharing areas regarding unique athletic and personal issues (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1991; Parham, 1993). “As any relationship progresses, the qualitative nature of communication is likely to change. In the advising relationship, a focus on task-related issues early in the relationship may be expanded to later stages to include...personal/social matters” (Nadler & Nadler, 1999, p. 48). For example, student-athletes may disclose feelings of depression following a poor athletic performance (Hinkle, 1996), experiencing difficulty with balancing academic and athletic demands (Humphrey, Yow, & Bowden, 2000; Rhatigan, 1984), tremendous anxiety leading up to competition (Fertman, 2008), or struggles handling pressures (e.g., desperately wanting to succeed in athletics) such that they engage in harmful behaviors including, for instance, drug use and alcohol abuse (Damm & Murray, 1996; Jordan & Denson, 1990). Talking to the advisor likely provides some relief to the troubled student-athlete, especially if the advisor shows empathy for his or her situation.

However, upon hearing certain types of information, advisors face a certain degree of fiduciary responsibility to care for the information divulged, and they must know the appropriate time to share private information with a third party. For example, advisors may choose to reveal the sensitive information to someone else with whom the student has a relationship (e.g., a coach) (Petronio, 2002; Rotenberg, 1986). Researchers (e.g., Yovetich & Drigotas, 1999) have
used a relay-race analogy to help explain how third-party disclosure works:

The first leg [of the relay] is that of a personal, private self-disclosure—one individual reveals personal information to another with the implicit or explicit understanding that it not be relayed further. The second leg of the relay... is the disclosure of that information to a third party. (p. 1135)

The communication of information by a student-athlete to an advisor constitutes the first leg of the relay race. When the advisor transmits the information to someone else, she or he is creating the second leg of the race. For example, when a student-athlete tells an advisor about suffering from depression after not being selected in the draft of a professional sports league (Duderstadt, 2000), the advisor may feel compelled to reveal this information to a third party, such as a sports counseling psychologist, who can help the student-athlete cope with this disappointment and resulting mental-health concerns (Bunker & McGuire, 1985; Hinkle, 1996). In fact, the advisor may feel obliged to disclose to a third party for two specific reasons: a) The advisor does not possess the necessary training or education to effectively deal with the gravity of the situation (Brooks, Etzel, & Ostrow, 1987; Etzel, Pinkney, & Hinkle, 1995), or b) the student-athlete refused to visit with professional counseling-services staff due to perceived social stigma of weakness attached to those who seek counseling (Brewer, Van Raalte, Petitpas, Bachman, & Weinhold, 1998; Watson, 2003).

Conversely, the advisor might feel equally motivated to conceal the student-athlete’s information from a third party, such as a sports counseling psychologist, due to a promise elicited by the student-athlete to keep the conversation confidential. In this case, as previously stated by Yovetich and Drigotas (1999), the parties share an “explicit understanding that [the information] not be relayed further” (p. 1135).

Confidants often communicate specific rules about ways to handle their private information; that is, the teller gives instructions with the intent to control or regulate the listener’s behavior (Shimanoff, 1980). Student-athletes may give explicit instructions to advisors about how to manage the shared information. For instance, they may employ prior restraint phrases, also known as disclosure warnings: “Don’t tell anybody what I’m about to say” (Petronio & Bantz, 1991). The student-athlete provides disclosure warnings to an advisor deemed trustworthy to the extent that the advisee expects the request will be honored. However, many student-athletes voluntarily sign waivers to forgo the rights guaranteed by the Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Realizing that professors can share academic progress information with advisors via grade report forms and that a FERPA waiver gives advisors permission to share that information with others, including parents or coaches (Denson, 1996), a struggling student-athlete may initiate a disclosure by saying, “Don’t tell my parents or my coach about my bad grades.”

At times, an advisor does not believe that the student-athlete’s established rules concerning private information appropriately apply to a situation (Petronio, 2002) and chooses to disregard the express desire to suppress it. For example, an advisor may disregard a student-athlete’s disclosure warning of “Do not tell my coach that I’m thinking about changing to a different sport,” believing it counters the advisor’s loyalties to the school, and tells the coach of the student-athlete’s contemplation. Such an action could produce turbulence in the relationship between advisor and student-athlete (Petronio, 2002) as the student-athlete may feel betrayed or disappointed. The resulting lack of trust may limit the disclosures the advisor receives from the student-athlete, making obtaining relevant advising information more difficult.

Privacy expectations form the central fulcrum in the complex interpersonal relationship between advisors and student-athletes. Student-athletes disclose private information to advisors, sometimes qualifying the ways to use it. After listening to student-athletes’ disclosures, advisors must decide the actions, if any, to take. During the process, advisors must remain mindful of the impact (non)disclosure will exert on relationships with student-athletes and others (e.g., coaches). To learn more about the privacy rules that student-athletes communicate to advisors and the actions advisors take when handling revealed private information in light of any rules issued by the student-athlete, I posed the following research questions to guide the study:

RQ1: What type of privacy rules do student-athletes communicate to advisors?
RQ2: How do advisors manage student-athletes’ private information following the student-athlete issued privacy rules?

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants (N = 37) were current and former academic advisors of college and university student-athletes representative of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (2013) Division I (n = 30), IAA (n = 2), II (n = 4), and III (n = 1) institutions, all of which are regulated by the rules of the NCAA. Originally recruited with an e-mail announcement, those who responded were asked to refer others who they knew would want to participate. This practice enabled me to take advantage of the commonly used snowball sampling technique (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

To qualify for the study, all participants needed a minimum of 2 years of experience as an academic advisor, and those not engaged as an advisor for more than 5 years were ineligible. Of those meeting the requirements and volunteering to participate, 22 were current advisors and 15 were former advisors. Twenty-one males and 16 females participated; 17 were African American, and 20 identified as Caucasian. The mean age of the participants was 35 years.

**Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

The present study was fully grounded in qualitative research methods (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). Ergo, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect all of the data needed to answer the research questions (as per Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I gave the respondents a series of prompts, such as, “Tell me about a time, if ever, when you were unsure what to do with information revealed to you by a student-athlete.” I also asked specific questions including, “If a student-athlete told you some problematic news for the student (e.g., he or she was depressed), what would you do or say?” “Has a student-athlete ever given you implicit or explicit instructions about what to do with private information she or he divulged to you?”

The prompts and questions were developed to elicit rich, descriptive responses from the participants so the information contributed directly to the answers to the research questions. Moreover, I used the literature as a guide in creating well-conceived interview items. After establishing a formal interview protocol, I solicited feedback from two well-respected qualitative researchers, one of whom was also knowledgeable about the field of college athletics. Their useful feedback helped me refine the questions.

The procedure of analysis for the data depended on a combination of Smith’s (1995) thematic analysis method and Owen’s (1984) tripartite approach. Initially, I read each transcript to gain familiarity with the textual data, and I then re-read the accounts to identify emerging themes. According to Owen, a theme should meet three criteria: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence involves interpreting meaning evident in the transcript, or more specifically, discovering, in at least two places in the transcripts, the same meaning even if not conveyed in precisely the same words. Second, repetition concerns discovering, “repetition of key words, phrases or sentences” (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Third, forcefulness involves noting words or phrases highlighted in the transcript as well as paralanguage as characterized, for example, by the tone or volume of voice. Because thematic analysis is iterative (i.e., themes were identified within the textual data collected), I determined theme clusters conceptually, continuing until lack of emerging data indicated that I had reached the saturation point (Creswell, 1998; Smith, 1995); that is, the observed comparable patterns did not result in any additional categories. In the final step, I developed a memo (as per Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 193) by joining the derived themes with quotations or exemplar statements given by participants.

**Results and Interpretation**

As per the purpose of this investigation, I discovered that student-athletes communicated explicit rules in the form of disclosure warnings regarding how they wanted their private information handled by advisors. The advisors participating in this study stated that student-athletes very clearly indicated who should not have access to their private information. Advisors also explained how they handled student-athletes’ private information after receiving the disclosure warnings. Based on participant reports, disclosure warnings were categorized into three different groups: a) do not tell my coaches, b) do not tell my parents, c) do not tell athletic administrative personnel.

**Disclosure Warnings Regarding Coaches**

Student-athletes regularly told advisors not to inform coaches about private information they
had confided to the advisor. In the interviews, advisors gave examples of situations in which student-athletes did not want their information revealed to coaches. Specifically, student-athletes wanted to keep the following concerns confidential: a) academic problems, b) considerations of transferring to a different school, c) injuries, and d) personal transgressions.

Academic problems. In one particular instance, a female advisor reflected on a time when a student-athlete disclosed imminent failure to pass a class:

A student-athlete came into my office a couple of weeks ago [and told me she was going to fail one of her classes], and the professor of hers called and told me that she would be getting an F in that course. [The student-athlete] asked me not to tell her coaches [about the F in the course]. And she didn’t want me to tell her coaches what the professor who gave her the F told me about her, which was very negative. I told her that I would have to tell the coaches [about her poor grade] because of the fact that they (i.e., the athletic department) are paying for [her] classes. I told her I would be explaining to her assistant coach that she dropped a class and the reason for dropping it and that I would not tell them about the information her professor said about her.

As this excerpt illustrates, although the student-athlete explicitly told the advisor not to tell her coaches about her unfavorable academic situation, the advisor explained that she needed to tell the coaches because the athletic department was paying for the student-athlete’s educational expenses. The advisor, aware of her professional obligation to inform the coaches about a student-athlete’s failing grade, chose not to honor the disclosure warning. However, she did not share the professor’s negative comments about the student-athlete. When pressed for the reasons she decided against revealing the professor’s opinion to the coaches, she explained that the student-athlete “begged her not to.”

Transferring to a different school. Many advisors reported that student-athletes told them not to tell coaches about a desire to transfer to another institution. For instance, a female advisor recounted a session in which a nonscholarship student-athlete disclosed being recruited by another institution with offers of a full athletic scholarship:

There are a lot of times when a student-athlete will say, “Please don’t tell my coach this.” I’ve got a student right now who came to me wanting to know about how class credits transfer because he has just been offered a full-ride scholarship to another college. But he doesn’t want his coach to know. His worry is that, since he’s a walk-on, [the coaches] have nothing invested in him. They know that if he’s looking [at other schools] then why not kick him off the team right now? So I [said], “I understand where you are coming from.” So you know the way we dealt with that in the end was I didn’t tell the coach.

In this example, the advisor honored the student-athlete’s disclosure warning because she understood the student’s concern about being prematurely released from the team. When asked to speculate on the reasons the student-athlete offered such a full explanation for wanting to keep the information concealed, the advisor explained that the student-athlete realized that informing the coach to protect the interest of both the coach and the team was in the advisor’s discretion. The advisor could have privileged her relationship with the coach to protect herself; upon discovering that the advisor withheld the student-athlete’s intentions, the coach could have felt betrayed. This situation highlights the disconcerting position of advisors managing student-athletes’ private information.

Athletic injuries. Advisors also reported that student-athletes issued disclosure warnings related to athletic injuries. For example, a female former advisor recounted a time when a student-athlete confided to her about suffering from a painful injury and then requested that she not tell the coach:

There was another student-athlete who came in hurt and she was on a team. And she would come in [to my office] and tell me how hurt she was. And she did not want her coach to know because her coach would bench her. And so she did not want me to let
her coach know that she was hurt. That was information that I kept quiet.

As a co-owner of the private information, the advisor knew that the student-athlete wanted to play in an important game and thus decided to honor the student’s request of confidentiality. The advisor explained that the student-athlete “promised” her that after the game she would “tell the trainer” about the pain she was feeling from the injury. When further probed during the interview, the advisor stated that she made clear the reasons that the coach should be notified about the injury. Nevertheless, the advisor was satisfied that the student-athlete would receive the needed help, if not immediately. Ultimately, the student-athlete spoke to the trainer and the injury eventually healed.

Some may argue that the advisor should have dismissed the student-athlete’s disclosure warning and immediately informed the coach about the injury to protect the long-term well-being of the student-athlete. After all, the student-athlete could have suffered an even more substantial physical setback while participating injured in the game, and if the student-athlete’s coaches or parents discovered that the advisor concealed information on the initial injury, the advisor could have found herself in grave jeopardy with regard to continued employment.

**Personal transgressions.** Similar to other topics that student-athletes ask advisors to conceal, revelations of poor judgment or behavior may leave an advisor wondering about the best course of action. For instance, a former advisor recalled an occasion when a student-athlete confided to him about a legal issue that could have negatively impacted the university:

A student-athlete came to me [and] told me he finished his high school [education] in prison. And I knew that [my institution] had a rule against enrolling convicted felons in our conference. And I said [to him], “Well how did that happen? Because you fill out paperwork that says you cannot be [enrolled here as a convicted felon].” I said, “How did you answer that question [on the application]?” He said, “Well I said ‘no.’” [I said], “But you just told me that you were incarcerated.” He said, “Yeah.” So now I have this information and I feel like I’m an accessory now because I know that this student maybe has a potential offense. And I say, “Okay, [student] you need to talk to your coach about this situation right away! And I want to give you some time to go to him. By tomorrow, 24 hours, you need to have worked this out. I’m going to talk to coach.” I didn’t want to jeopardize the university.

When questioned further, the advisor stated that the student-athlete was adamantly opposed to revealing the information to the coach for fear of being dismissed from the institution. Nevertheless, the advisor insisted that the student-athlete reveal the information to a third party, threatening to reveal it if the student-athlete failed to come forth of his own accord. By taking this action, the advisor, realizing the seriousness of the situation, took steps to protect the university.

**Disclosure Warnings Regarding Parents and Athletic Administrative Personnel**

Student-athletes are not only concerned about the information divulged to coaches. Advisors cited examples of student-athletes requesting that advisors not share academic problems with parents or concerns over body/diet issues with noncoaching athletic personnel.

**Academic problems.** A female advisor recounted an occasion when a student-athlete warned her not to tell his father about his poor performance on a class exam:

When [student-athletes] are not doing well they might say, “I know you talk to my dad but don’t tell him about this, you know, please.” I had a situation earlier this semester and one of my students was carrying five courses. We were really hanging fire on one class and he goofed up and made a really bad grade on one test. And I said, “Oh man,” and he looked at me and said, “Don’t tell my dad.” I said, “What about this particular test?” And he said, “Yeah don’t tell him.” I said, “Are you going to pull it out?” And he said, “Yeah.” I said, “Okay, okay, I won’t tell him.” And I didn’t.

The advisor hesitated to comply with the warning until the student-athlete confirmed that he would earn a favorable outcome in the class (e.g., “Are you going to pull it out?” “Yeah.”). Because he had waived his FERPA rights, the student-athlete knew his father could be informed about his poor test performance. Often dependent
on parents to place requisite leverage needed to
motivate student-athletes to elevate their academ-
ic performance, advisors frequently confer with
parents on grades, but in this case, the advisor
decided to keep the information concealed. Her
decision could have backfired if the student-
athlete failed the course and the parent discovered
that the advisor purposely concealed knowledge
of the bad test grade. In such a case, the advisor
would be caught on a tightrope between the
student-athlete and the parent, illustrating another
element of advisors’ challenges as they manage
multiple relationships.

Body/diet issues. A male advisor shared the
narrative of a student-athlete who divulged
dissatisfaction with her own body composition:

A young lady talked to me about body
weight. She didn’t feel comfortable with the
fact that she was picking up too much
weight. Well you know, first I told her to talk
to the dietician. And I told her—I said, “You
know I’m telling you to talk to the dietician,”
and I’m saying, “Hey, if you don’t talk to the
dietitian at some point, just to let you know, I
will. When I see a dietician I’m going to
bring your name up. And I’m going to say,
‘Hey, has this individual come to talk to you
about the particular weight problem?’” I
want to make sure that she is doing it the
right way and that she’s not losing the weight
the wrong way.

The advisor explained feeling that the student-
athlete’s struggle with body weight was likely to
lead to malnourishment and harmful behaviors
(e.g., bulimia) as indicated by the phrase “[lose]
the weight the wrong way.” The student-athlete
expressed the belief that the dietician should not
be notified of her situation because it was not
“any of their business.” The student-athlete also
felt like she would “eventually get things under
control.” Clearly the advisor disagreed, and he
dismissed the student-athlete’s disclosure warning
to protect her health. While many agree with the
advisor’s decision to disregard the student-ath-
lete’s warning for the individual’s own good,
others suggest that the advisor destroyed his
relationship with her based on his actions to force
her to reveal her weight issues.

Discussion
In conducting this research on personal advising
conversations, I learned that student-athletes issue
privacy rules in the form of disclosure warnings to
advisors, specifically to protect information from
coaches, parents, and athletic administrative per-
sonnel. The findings show that student-athletes
know they own their private information even after
they divulge it to the advisor, and as a result they
want to exert control over it (Petronio, 2002) by
wielding influence over whether or not it should be
relocated to third parties. Less concerned with the
best course of action for everyone affected, they
sought to protect their own interests and thereby
often made the job of the advisor quite challenging.
The finding supports research that suggests that
individuals desire to control their private informa-
tion whether in families (Petronio, 1994; Petronio
& Sargent, 2002; Serewicz, Dickson, Morrison, &
Poole, 2007), on social networking web sites
(Child, Pearson, & Petronio, 2007), or in the
college classroom (Hosek & Thompson, 2009).
That is, individuals believe they have the right to
choose the ways their personal information is
managed (Petronio, 2002).

Although student-athletes attempted to control
their private information by issuing disclosure
warnings, advisors did not automatically comply
with their requests. Rather, advisors often exer-
cised their superior position vis-à-vis student-
athletes by demonstrating the higher degree of
power in the advising relationship and using their
own discretion in handling the private information
owned by the student. This relationship between
advisors and student-athletes resembles that be-
tween parents and children. Children want to
exercise a certain amount of privacy control over
their parents and others (Burgoon, Parrot, Le Poire,
Kelley, Walther, & Perry, 1989; Petronio, 1994,
2002) and student-athletes want to do the same
with advisors. Nevertheless, the authority figures,
whether parents or advisors, typically determine
the way the private information is handled, and the
present study revealed certain instances when
advisors convinced student-athletes to divulge
private information to others by threatening to do
it themselves.

Cognizant of their professional role, the advi-
sors made decisions to protect the student-athlete’s
well-being and the integrity of the institution, both
of which outweighed the importance of the
student-athlete’s disclosure warning. Advisors were
willing to lose the trust of student-athletes by
choosing not to comply with their disclosure
warnings if concealment might hurt the student-
athlete or sully the reputation of the institution.
They referred to these choices as part of their job to
maintain the good of the whole program and the student-athlete. Like a good parent, advisors weighed their options and chose the best course for everyone involved (including the student-athletes). I believe that, as advisors chose to protect student-athletes and the institution, they protected themselves as well. Inauspicious outcomes to either the student or the institution may result in severe reprimands to advisors (e.g., being relieved of their position), and therefore, the advisors in this study did their best to exercise good judgment in choosing whether to reveal or conceal private information.

This research offers unique insight into the difficult balance advisors must strike as they work with student-athletes and offers insight into the loyalty conflicts advisors experience in the process (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). As seen in the findings, advisors maintained a relationship with both student-athletes and others important to the student-athletes, such as coaches, athletic training personnel, and parents (whom they frequently met along with student-athletes on recruiting visits and orientation). When student-athletes issued a disclosure warning for advisors to conceal information from these third parties, advisors decided which loyalty is most important. This decidedly unnerving situation for advisors involves risks to relationships because one party may perceive that the advisor inappropriately privileges one loyalty over another.

Demonstrated in the present study, advisors negotiating an indefinite balancing act while trapped in a complicated web of relationships sometimes complied with student-athletes’ disclosure warnings. In these cases, advisors felt that honoring the wishes of the student-athlete proved most important; others might have argued for a different course of action and therefore the study shows the chances advisors take to allow student-athletes some privacy control. In these situations, perhaps advisors respect the student-athletes as young adults who should be entitled to exercise such control. This study sheds light on the constant ethical questions that advisors confront as they navigate through the arduous advising environment.

Because of the multitude of potential ethical questions raised in each unique situation, academic advising units cannot provide advisors with a decidedly unambiguous set of privacy guidelines for their work with student-athletes. Instead, basic guidelines and consultations with colleagues help them manage privacy issues with their advisees and make effective, proper decisions. The guidelines underwrite the institutional policy advisors need to know, and communication between advisors helps them brainstorm possible ways to handle complex privacy issues. The present study calls for a complete evaluation of advising unit procedures for managing information divulged by student-athletes.

Case studies help advisors learn to handle situations in which student-athletes share private information. They enable advisors to better understand their own privacy orientation and the implicit expectations of the college in managing information of a personal nature. An appropriate training program features a four-pronged approach: a) baseline testing for advisors to determine their privacy orientation; b) presentation, analysis, and recognition of privacy management strategies through scenario-based case studies; c) analysis of explicit and implicit administrative and organizational information management rules; d) postintervention testing to determine development of privacy management skills. This study provides some useful content for case studies. Each case study includes a hypothetical scenario and advisors are asked how they would respond to the specific situation depicted. Adequate training and preparation benefit advisors who, with little guidance, often must make difficult decisions to protect both the institution and the student-athlete while caught in the middle of implicit assumptions from all parties directly and indirectly involved with the student-athlete.

Limitations

Although I tried to anticipate and avert all shortcomings, this study is not without limitations. The primary limitation involves the sample of participants, the majority of which represent athletic/academic advisors either currently or formerly affiliated with Division I institutions rather than Division IAA, Division II, or Division III institutions. A more balanced sample would have provided readers with a broader perspective of the experiences of advisors managing privacy disclosure warnings with student-athletes. While the goal of the present study was not to draw attention to differences, as stressing differences would have been inconsistent with the interpretive research paradigm, gaining some insight into the experiences of a larger number of advisors from institutions other than Division I would have offered more breadth to my findings.
While this study on the management of student-athlete disclosures provides insight into the actions advisors take following disclosures from student-athletes, it offers less about the psychological process that leads to the advisors’ decisions. While this lack of information creates a second limitation in this study, others delving into the systematic thinking of advisors could create a new line of inquiry based on the preliminary results shown here.

While important to acknowledge them, the limitations of this study did not negate the contribution the results make to the understanding of communication and privacy. Neither do they diminish their contribution to research on the advisor and student-athlete relationship or more overarching topics in college student-athletes and intercollegiate athletics.

**Directions for Future Research**

I recommend as a complementary direction for future research an exploration on communication privacy management from the perspective of student-athletes. In the present study, I solely garnered the views of athletic/academic advisors. Gaining insight from student-athletes would provide a fresh outlook on their expectations of advisors with whom they confide private information concerning academic, athletic, and personal issues. For example, another study might address the following questions: Do student-athletes expect that advisors will comply with instructions about how to manage their private information? Do student-athletes assume that advisors, in a position of authority, will simply do as they please with student-athletes’ private information?

Another direction for future researchers may lead to an investigation of the variables, such as gender, that may influence the management of privacy. Specifically, does the gender of advisor and advisee matter in the management of privacy disclosure warnings? For example, are male advisors more (or less) likely to honor privacy disclosure warnings from their female advisees? What about from male advisees? Are female advisors more or less likely to honor privacy disclosure warnings from their male advisees? What about their female advisees? The answers may lead to further inquiry into reasons for any found differences.

A final direction for researchers interested in the advisor view may involve exploration of ways that privacy management issues correlate with relational and job satisfaction. Does the potential or felt stress of dealing with student-athletes and others (e.g., parents, coaches) while trying to decide on private information disclosure translate into advisor job dissatisfaction? Could this tension lead to advisors discontinuing their work with student-athletes?

My hope is that the findings of this preliminary study will help academic services units grow in their knowledge about communication privacy management. Most important, I hope it leads to successful efforts to serve student-athletes.

**References**


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**Author’s Note**

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