

An Understanding of Syracuse University Athletic Communications

Daniel Loftus

Professor Horn

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Question One

Part One

The organization this paper will explore is Syracuse University Athletic Communications (SUAC). SUAC serves as the media and communications office for all of Syracuse University athletics. The first records of the SUAC office dates back to 1947 when the position of a “publicity director” was featured beginning in that year’s football media guide. The office has grown over the decades and now consists of nine employees: one executive senior associate athletic director, seven sports information directors, and one photographer. Sue Edson serves as the head of the department as the executive senior associate athletic director of communications. Pete Moore, the sports information director for men’s basketball, is the director of athletic communications. Serving under him are four assistant directors of athletic communications and two athletic communications assistants who are all responsible for being the sports information directors for various sports. As part of my research, I had the opportunity to interview Olivia Coiro, who is one of the assistant directors of athletic communications and the sports information director for women’s basketball, field hockey and men’s and women’s rowing.

The SUAC office is located inside the Stevenson Educational Center in Manley Field House on East Colvin Street in Syracuse, New York. The sports information directors are also on site of every sporting event at home and many of the road games. The main function of the office is the promotion and communication of the seven men’s and 11 women’s varsity sports sponsored by Syracuse University. Coiro described their job as serving as a liaison between the media and the players and coaches while promoting the stories and successes of their teams and student athletes through various forms of media like web, print, social, etc. SUAC prescribes to the same mission statement that the entire athletic department holds. Their overarching goal is to

“create and foster a culture of academic and athletic excellence which prepares student-athletes as leaders in our global society,” (see Appendix A for the full mission statement).

One unique feature of this office is their heavy reliance on interns. SUAC employs a group of unpaid interns who assist the sports information directors with daily tasks and who help before, during and after sporting events. This is a quite unique opportunity for interns who work very closely with professionals and complete important, real-world tasks for the communications office.

Part Two

Based on our studies this semester, my research, and my discussion with Olivia Coiro, I would classify SUAC as an open system. One important criteria required to be categorized as an open system is the understanding by the organization that other subsystems and the environment play a role in their activity (Horn, 2019a). SUAC does not just write and release stories to the public without regard for who they are writing for or the student-athletes they are writing about. During my interview, Coiro discussed in detail the importance of working with and communicating alongside other departments on-campus as part of their overall communications strategy. “Our communications staff would not be able to do what we do if we didn’t communicate with other areas [in the university],” said Coiro. She pointed to how interlocked the different sectors of athletics are when it comes to their overall success. Coiro said how when the women’s basketball team was trying to break their home attendance record this season, they had to coordinate their communications strategy with the marketing team, ticket sales, equipment and main campus. They hold regular meetings to discuss their strategy, and Coiro emphasized their importance to the strength of their communications plan and the success of the events.

In terms of SUAC's interaction with the environment, they lean heavily on social media and actively track the data from their communication. Coiro said her job as part of communication for the team is not only telling people the scores and statistics from games, but to also share the stories of the players and show their personality. She can interact with followers on their various team accounts to answer questions fans have about things like start times of games. Also, she receives feedback on the success of her posts through tracking engagements. She said she closely monitors their engagement numbers on specific days and uses it as a feedback mechanism for the success of her posts. This quantitative measure form of evaluation and the welcomed nature of feedback on social media both point to SUAC being an open-based system.

Question Two

Part One

The Syracuse University Athletic Communications office serves the public relations function of a much larger system that is Syracuse University Athletics. As I have learned in class, the PR subsection of a system actually plays a role within all other subsystems and helps the system interact with its environment. SUAC plays this exact role within the athletic department. They communicate with the distribution subsystem, which is made up of groups like marketing and ticket sales, on things like promotional events. SUAC works with production, which could be considered both the people who run the events like announcers and scorekeepers as well as the teams and coaching staffs. Finally, they serve as the liaison between athletics and all publics. Groups like the media, other athletic departments and fans contact and communicate with SUAC on a regular basis.

Based on my discussion with Olivia Coiro and my understanding of “technicians” and “managers,” I would classify her and the other sports information directors as managers. These employees are always on call, taking media requests and posting to social media at all hours of the day. Although they have jobs handed to them from the management of the department, the sports information directors set many of their own goals for the season, according to Coiro who told me it was her goal this season to improve engagement on social media for women’s basketball. They are also the only one in charge of communication at their sport’s events so it is their job to run the program. Also, even though they are skilled within production aspects like Adobe Suite and videography, much of their job is mission-based and focused on growing the following and interest of their team’s players and coaches. Always being on call, creating their own goals and plans, being-mission oriented and managing programs are all tasks of a manager (Horn, 2019a). In the structure of this organization, I would classify the student employees as the technicians. These employees implement the writing and videography goals of the managers, are rarely tasked with making major decisions, only work set hours, and are hired with a certain skill set in mind. This describes the role of a technician well.

Part Two

As part of conducting my research, I interviewed Olivia Coiro, Assistant Director of Athletic Communications and Sports Information Director for women’s basketball, field hockey and men’s and women’s rowing. Coiro studied sports management at Lasell College and received her bachelor’s degree in 2013. She initially learned of this career path when she worked for the game day staff in her school’s athletic department, and after graduation she landed a job as a sports information director for eight different sports at Lynn University. Following three and a half years there, she became a media contact at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro

and later East Carolina. She was hired to her current position at Syracuse University in early 2018.

Olivia told me she is an active member of a professional organization called the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA). CoSIDA is a national organization made up of various sports PR, media relations and communications professionals from college athletic departments around the United States and Canada (Staff Directory, n.d.). She serves as a committee chair for the young professionals where she helps coordinate webinars and organizes table and panel discussions at annual conventions. Also, Coiro is a member of the Association for Women in Sports Media (AWSM). This organization “supports the advancement and growth of women” in the sports media industry (About AWSM, n.d.).

Olivia described how passionate she is about working as a sports information director, and she also explained just how important that passion is in order to be successful and enjoy a job in this industry. She said she loves her job because of her enthusiasm for sports and statistics. She also enjoys having the opportunity to work with college-age individuals. She discussed how she was drawn to the profession because of its unique work schedule. “I always knew I didn’t want to sit in a cubicle and work a nine-to-five job that gave me no enjoyment,” said Coiro. However, she advised me that this passion and desire to work is necessary to be successful in her type of position. Coiro said it is generally a thankless job with small events along the way which remind her why she chose the career path she did. She stressed to me that as long as you love the work involved, it will never actually feel like a job.

Part Three

“Dominant Coalition” refers to the group of people within systems and organizations who hold the majority of decision making power and set the course for an organization through the

strategies and goals these people set (as cited in Horn, 2019). Based on my knowledge of the organizational structure of SUAC and my discussion of it with Olivia Coiro, I believe the top practitioner in SUAC, Sue Edson, is in fact a member of the athletic department's dominant coalition.

Part Four

There are several reasons to support my belief that Sue Edson is a member of the athletic department's dominant coalition. First, her title within her own department and her inclusion within administration point to her being a member of this group. Sue Edson is the Executive Senior Associate Athletic Director for Communications. Her position is listed on their website under both the "Athletic Communications" header as well as the "Administration" header where people like the Director of Athletics and other executives are found. The fact that SUAC has a member who is included as part of the group of associate athletic directors shows their inclusion at the table which makes major decisions for the organization (Cuse.com, n.d.). Coiro told me that everyone in the office reports to Edson directly, so she serves as the connection between the entire SUAC office and the administration of athletics.

Also, Coiro mentioned Andrew Goodrich, the chief marketing officer in the administration, as an important person to SUAC when it comes to external communications. Edson reports to Goodrich who is directly linked to Director of Athletics John Wildhack. These two people, Edson and Goodrich, having such close connections to the top of the athletic departments administrative staff suggests to me that they have an influential role in decision making and are members of this organization's dominant coalition.

Question Three

Harlow's definition of public relations has several pieces and points which are exemplified in the work of SUAC. The first portion of the definition says that PR is "the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding and cooperation between an organization and its publics" (as cited in Horn, 2019b). Clearly, this department is a distinct management function, with its own office and organizational structure which connects to the rest of athletics. They are in charge of all media related activities for the school's sport teams. Also, Olivia said she is responsible for "communicating what [my] organization or team ... is doing" to the public while at the same time "receiving some feedback and being able to make what you are doing better." This two-way form of communication allows these sports information directors to create and maintain a relationship with the publics which they serve.

The next piece of public relations, according to Harlow, is that it "involves the management of problems and issues." Coiro said most of her experience with handling problems and issues involve working with the media. She said when negative news breaks about players or coaches, it is part of her job to work with the media to make sure those she represents are presented fairly to the public.

Olivia and the other sports information directors help the SUAC management, Sue Edson, "keep informed on, and responsive to, public opinion" on a regular basis. The office has weekly staff meetings where, in part, they discuss replies and messages they get from fans on social media. Olivia said these meetings allow them to share possible items that that they should be concerned about or should look to address. Not just management, but the rest of the office as well, stays informed and up to date on public opinion during these staff meetings.

Next, Coiro and SUAC understands their responsibility to “serve the public interest.” During my time interviewing Olivia, the phone in the office rang several times with fans asking various questions about things like game start times and access to media materials. Olivia said they frequently receive phone calls from fans and it is a part of SUAC’s job to be responsive to fan requests. Also, Olivia talked about how important social media is to her job. Social media allows her to interact with the public and provide the type of content they desire are respond to the best.

Furthermore, the sports information directors at SUAC are constantly changing the content they create because they serve as an “early warning system to help anticipate trends.” Olivia said this topic comes up regularly when it comes to the digital content creation she and her colleagues are involved with. In recent years, the preferred type of digital content for social media has changed rapidly. According to Coiro, early social media in the sports information business was all about graphics. Social quickly became more visual and moved towards motion graphics. Now, Olivia said, social media is all about high-quality videos and photographs (See Appendix B). She said in order to be on top of these fast-paced trends, one must be a part of social media. Coiro is active both on her personal account as well as the team accounts she runs which allows her to stay up-to-date on the latest trends and share it with the other employees at SUAC.

Finally, SUAC uses “research and ethical communication as its principle tools” as part of its daily activities. The Creative Services team in the athletic department works with SUAC to compile regular and annual reports which collect the analytical data for each teams’ web page and social accounts. This allows the sports information directors to examine the information they have shared and see what was successful and what failed in terms of engagement. Also, they

communicate with their teams and coaches in mind first and are always preparing materials which are fair to the competition while showcasing their athletes in a positive light.

Question 10

See Appendix C for a simplistic organizational chart for SUAC (via interview with Olivia Coiro).

Part One

There are several public relations positions within the SUAC office:

- Executive Senior Associate Athletic Director/Communications (Sue Edson): This position is the lead communications officer for all of athletics at Syracuse University. Activities for this individual include organizing media opportunities for major athletic announcements. For example, when Syracuse announced changes to the Carrier Dome, Edson worked with the University for all media engagement and announcements.
- Sports Information Directors: These individuals are responsible for communications and media relations for their assigned sports. They create digital content for their sports teams (video, photographs, Adobe production, media guides and materials, etc.) and travel with them to away competitions. They also handle all media inquiries for the athletes and teams they are responsible for.
 - Two sports information directors within the office are post-graduate positions. These individuals are responsible for their own sports and report to the executive senior associate athletic director/communications, and they are also overseen by the full-time sports information directors.

- SUAC Interns: These individuals report to and conduct tasks for the sports information directors. They assist in the creation of content as well as help at the sporting events. This is an unpaid position.

Part Two

According to Olivia, overall goals, for the office are set during staff meetings. These objectives are usually planned by management and simply passed to the sports information directors to accomplish. However, Olivia and the other sports information directors are also responsible for setting their own objectives, which are measurable (Horn, 2019c). For Olivia, she said her main objective this year was to increase the social media presence of women's basketball in a "better way of connecting with...fans." Also, teams and coaches have meetings and discussions with their sports information directors about what they would like to see accomplished through their various channels of communication.

Part Three

The overall success of the SUAC office is evaluated based on several different criteria that varies based on the individual sports information director and their sport. For example, for women's basketball, Olivia evaluates the success of her public relations program based on growth in attendance at home games. She sees this as a sign that the public is receiving their message about the team and connecting with the team to the point where they choose to attend a game in person. Another criterion for success is the follower count and total engagement numbers on social media. Olivia measures the success of her new approach to using social media this year based on those factors.

Part Four

In the SUAC office, the individuals are rated based on performance during performance reviews. All of the sports information directors meet with the executive senior associate AD/communications, Sue Edson, annually for these meetings. Also, Olivia said she has “a pretty open line of communication with [Sue Edson],” and she feels comfortable walking into her office to receive feedback and discuss her work.

Question 12

As I have discussed throughout this paper, social media is an extremely important aspect of SUAC’s communication strategy. Each team has various social media platforms where sports information directors post content regularly. It is a key way from them to have intimate and two-way communication with their target publics. Social media engagement is made up of the awareness of posts, interaction on the part of readers, meaning both received by the reader and given by the poster and influence of the reader (Horn, 2019c). Also, college athletics has a profound impact on the social media presence of a university. Athletics increase the online conversation for a school by over 200 percent (as cited in App, 2019). All of these components are what make social media a unique communication channel primed for strong relationship building. However, according to Olivia, SUAC’s social media presence was not always motivated by relationship building.

An example of a changing social media presence is seen in the account for Syracuse Women’s basketball. Olivia said their posts used to consist of score graphics, results, player of the game posts, etc. This year, however, the women’s basketball social accounts took a different approach. Olivia made it a point to show more of the personality of the team. Olivia said she did this because women’s basketball brings a “unique culture” of fans which want to know what the

team is like and the type of people they are. Therefore, Olivia posted more about events happening off the court and showed the team having fun. Olivia said she still included many posts about the games like highlights and photos, but she also had a more balanced approach when it came to on-court versus off-court content.

After my discussions with Olivia and my own evaluation of their accounts, I have one suggestion for how to improve SUAC's social media strategy. There is a clear discrepancy between the number of posts between sports. Take women's rowing and women's basketball as an example. From April 15-30, the women's rowing account had 18 tweets featured on its page (tweets and retweets) while the women's basketball account had 22 featured, yet women's rowing is in-season when basketball is over for the year. During a random 15-day period in the women's basketball season (February 10-25), their account had over 190 tweets featured. Also, Olivia told me how important social media is to teams like rowing that rely heavily on walk-ons and recruiting based on their online presence. Although women's basketball has a greater following than women's rowing, I think the content should be more equal among sports if one plans to fully and properly promote all sports to a wide public. It has been proven to be the best way to create interaction between the team and the public, and I think other teams could benefit from that greater exposure.

Question 13

Data and analytics are becoming more in the fold in PR, especially in the research and evaluation stages of strategic planning. Tracking things like engagement numbers allow practitioners to use qualitative measures as part of their research. Also, data and statistics are gathered by professionals through things like surveys and inquires which become measurements in the evaluation stage (Horn, 2019c). Data allows practitioners to predict news cycles, see where

their content is best working with their audience, and see where a further investment in relationship building could be made (Corliss, 2017). Data and analytics play an important role in the work done by the sports information directors in the SUAC office.

Firstly, data and analytics are tracked and analyzed constantly when it comes to their presence on the internet. SUAC works with Syracuse Athletics' Creative Services team to gather and track social media analytics, like impressions and engagements, and hits on their team webpages. Thanks to this, the sports information directors are able to learn when their pages are heavily active with the public, thus allowing them to capitalize on opportunities and improve overall content. Olivia said she is able to use the analytics gathered by the creative team to tell what messages worked well and what was less successful.

Furthermore, SUAC uses outside resources to track data for their messages. They use companies which collect reach and impressions data for major sporting events. For example, during the women's basketball March Madness tournament, Olivia said she was able to pull data on the success of her social media posts during the event. According to Olivia, this type of data is now becoming more available for other college sports like rowing and tennis. This will allow sports information directors to have a better scope of the entire reach of all Syracuse athletic teams on social media.

Coiro told me she also tracks data she can quickly retrieve on her own. Verified accounts on Instagram are easily able to track the total views to their page. Olivia said she tracks these numbers regularly to better understand trends and the impact of her posts. For instance, at the time of our interview, April 29, Olivia said the women's basketball Instagram account was averaging about 712 viewers that week, but during the NCAA Tournament, the page was

averaging over 16,000 viewers per week. Having access to this kind of data allows the sports information directors to realize the high and low times of action on their page.

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Appendix A

Syracuse University Athletic Department Mission Statement (cuse.com)

Create and foster a culture of academic and athletic excellence which prepares student-athletes as leaders in our global society.

Guiding Principles

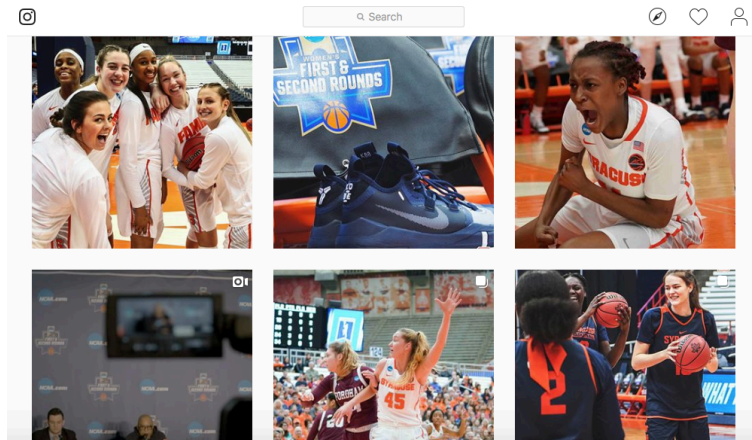
- **Collaboration** – Provide the best experience for our student-athletes by nurturing productivity, communication, and strategic decision-making within all facets of the department.
- **Community** – Engage our student-athletes and staff to service and support our community.
- **Competitive Success Across all Sports** - Strive to win ACC and conference championships while advancing all sports to participate in NCAA Championships.
- **Excellence and Diversity** – Provide our student-athletes and staff opportunities for continuous improvement to inspire their growth while fostering a global and inclusive environment where all backgrounds and beliefs are valued and respected.
- **Fan and Donor Experience** – Provide best possible experience to fans and donors as they support our student-athletes.
- **Fiscal Responsibility** – Maximize and carefully steward resources to support our student-athletes in a conscientious and creative manner.
- **Integrity** – Conduct ourselves with honesty and high ethical standards.
- **Sportsmanship** – Treat everyone with respect and represent Syracuse University proudly every day.
- **Student-Athlete Welfare** – Support the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of our student-athletes.

Appendix B

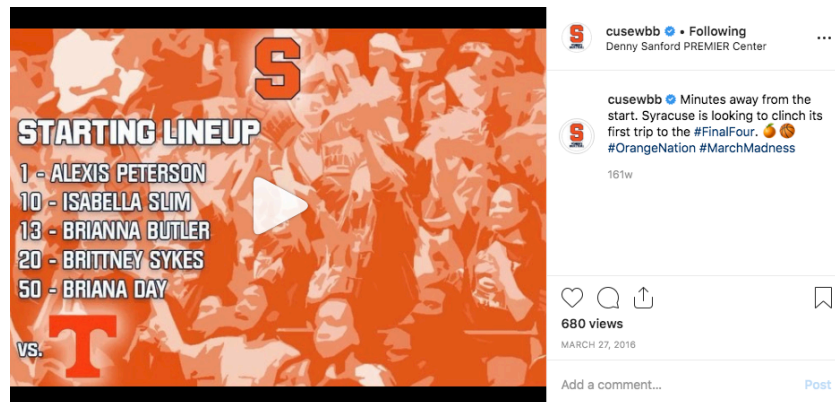
Trends in Sports Information – the use of high quality video and photos versus motion graphics

(Syracuse women's basketball)

Use of high quality videos and photos as part of social media message (Instagram 2019):



Use of motion graphics as part of social media message (Instagram 2016):



Appendix C

Simplistic Organizational Chart for SUAC (as explained to me by Assistant Director of Athletic Communications Olivia Coiro, and based on who individuals report to)

