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Jason Thompson

*Brooklyn College–City University of New York*, [jthompson@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:jthompson@brooklyn.cuny.edu)

Sandra Petronio

*Indiana University–Purdue University*, [petronio@iupui.edu](mailto:petronio@iupui.edu)

Dawn O. Braithwaite

*University of Nebraska–Lincoln*, [dbraithwaite1@unl.edu](mailto:dbraithwaite1@unl.edu)

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# An Examination of Privacy Rules for Academic Advisors and College Student-Athletes: A Communication Privacy Management Perspective

Jason Thompson, Sandra Petronio, and Dawn O. Braithwaite

Jason Thompson is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech Communication Arts and Sciences, Brooklyn College–City University of New York.

Sandra Petronio is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies and the IU School of Medicine, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, Indiana.

Dawn O. Braithwaite is a Professor in Department of Communication Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln. This manuscript is adapted from data collected for the first author's dissertation under the direction of Dawn O. Braithwaite.

*Corresponding author* — Jason Thompson, Department of Speech Communication Arts & Sciences, Brooklyn College–City University of New York, 2900 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11210, USA; email [jthompson@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:jthompson@brooklyn.cuny.edu)

## Abstract

This study explored how academic advisors managed revealed private information from college student-athletes. The 37 academic advisors were interviewed to address: What criteria advisors use to judge privacy rules regulating access or protection of shared private information from student-athletes, and how privacy-rule choices function in this context? Academic advisors interviewed represented 21 different institutions of the four NCAA division levels and 10 separate athletic conferences. Using Communication Privacy Management theory as a framework, findings indicated there were two main criteria: motivations and risk-benefit ratios used to develop privacy rules managing revealing and concealing the student-athlete's private information.

**Keywords:** College Advisors, College Student-Athletes, Communication Privacy Management, Confidentiality, Disclosure, Privacy

The academic advising relationship is an important role for faculty and professional staff at colleges and universities (Gaston-Gayles, 2003; Nadler & Nadler, 1999). Many universities have academic advising units within their athletic programs. The main purpose for these advising units is to assure that the student-athletes are able to manage both their sport's responsibilities and their academic studies. The ability to be an effective academic advisor<sup>1</sup> often rests on interpersonal skills and the relationship that is fostered between advisors and college student-athletes. Advisor effectiveness is important for the success of student-athletes (Denson, 1996). Besides being a valuable resource to help student-athletes locate tutors, develop good time management and learn effective study skills, advisors also are called upon to give advice on issues central to the student-athlete's personal life (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Finch & Gould, 1996; Jordan & Denson, 1990; Pinkney, 1996). Kramer (1995) argues that "academic advising has evolved from a single purpose, faculty activity to a comprehensive process that focuses on the academic, career, and personal development of students" (p. 3). Thus, these advisors discuss more than academic issues, some of which can be deeply personal and private to the student-athletes; for instance, learning disabilities (Clark & Parette, 2002), maintaining physical health and wellness while competing in their sport (Ferrante, Etzel, & Lantz, 1996; Parham, 1993), and coping with stereotypes and discrimination from individuals within and beyond the university community (Harris, Altekruze, & Engels, 2003; Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2008).

Advisors tend to function as confidants for students, yet they may not have the skills to effectively help them with the problems they reveal. Often decision making about how best to handle the disclosed information results in juggling competing loyalties between protecting student confidences and making disclosures about the information students share to fulfill the advisor's responsibilities to the institution. To examine this complex privacy management situation, this study uses Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2002, 2010) to investigate the difficulties advisors face in their jobs.

### **The Academic Advisor: Responsibilities and Demands**

In 1991, the governing body of intercollegiate athletics, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), made it mandatory that universities provide comprehensive academic advising services for all student-athletes, including tutorial services and life skills development (Meyer, 2005; NCAA Compliance Manual, 2010–2011). Storch and Ohlson (2009) argued that these support services are extremely vital to the success of student-athletes, stating, "strong student support services programs ultimately . . . serve as a foundation for [student-athletes'] current and future success" (p. 76). One of the most integral components of these support services made available to student-athletes is academic advisors (Carodine et al., 2001; Meyer, 2005). The parameters of responsibilities of academic advisors have been defined in universities and by the NCAA. For instance, academic advisors' primary responsibility is monitoring the academic progress of student-athletes (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Storch & Ohlson, 2009; Thomas & Minton, 2004). This task is important

as it ensures that student-athletes are effectively meeting the academic benchmarks established by the NCAA (NCAA Compliance Manual, 2010–2011).

Advisors are also responsible for caring for the well-being of student-athletes (Meyer, 2005). This entails advisors working in tandem with campus counseling and psychological services so that student-athletes' personal issues are properly addressed (Storch & Ohlson, 2009; Watson, 2003; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Personal issues may include, for example, eating disorders (Gutgesell, Moreau, & Thompson, 2003; Picard, 1999; S. H. Thompson & Gabriel, 2004). Dealing with such issues clearly brings attention back to the fact that the role of academic advisors goes beyond student-athletes' academic-related issues; as one advisor was quoted in Meyer's (2005) research, "I always told my athletes that I am your life advisor, not just your academic advisor" (p. 18). Advisors correspond with student-athletes about various nonacademic concerns making the title of "academic advisor" somewhat of a misnomer.

Clearly, one of the communicative vehicles cementing this advisor=student-athlete relationship is disclosures of private information that student-athletes reveal to advisors. Understanding the dynamics that occur during these confidential interactions may help both advisors and student-athletes identify the best way to make decisions and to judge the most effective course of action to help the student-athlete succeed. Using Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory, the present study explores the decision criteria used to judge appropriate privacy rules and the enactment of those privacy rules used to manage disclosed information from college student-athletes (Petronio, 2002). Because of the sensitive nature of the relationship that develops between the advisor and student-athlete, much of the information revealed by student-athletes represents private and personal issues (J. Thompson, 2008). Often the advisor is seen by the student-athletes as a confidant in addition to a provider of typical academic advising (Carodine et al., 2001; J. Thompson, 2008). However, given that advisors are not often trained in privacy management, they are left to judge the best way to deal with the student-athlete's disclosed information. The criteria advisors use to develop and implement privacy rules for these disclosive situations affects whether advisors reveal or conceal student-athletes' private information told in the context of the advisor-athlete interactions.<sup>2</sup>

### **Communication Privacy Management Theory**

As suggested above, CPM theory provides a predictive perspective for better understanding the complexity of how people manage private information (Petronio, 2002, 2010; Petronio & Durham, 2008). Petronio (2002) uses a boundary metaphor to illustrate how the *three main principles* guide choices about privacy management. *First*, people believe that they own their private information. Ownership is important because it characterizes the way people define what constitutes private information for them (e.g., Petronio & Gaff, 2010). Thinking about this information as housed within a privacy boundary helps to conceptualize the notion of information ownership by suggesting metaphoric borders that define information belonging to an individual. Because people also grant others access

to their private information, ownership can be shared with authorized co-owners, as we see with the student-athletes and their advisors, opening up the boundary to incorporate the intended recipients.

*Second*, privacy control over access is critical since people believe they own their private information. The way access is controlled and privacy boundaries are opened depends on privacy rules that provide the original owner a way to regulate the flow of information to others. Original owners make judgments about who should be privy based on privacy-rule criteria that may be the result of motivations, culture, or contexts that call for granting access. Original owners also assume that once they tell private information, they expect the recipient to abide by the way they wish them to handle the information. Thus, original owners see the recipient having fiduciary responsibilities for the disclosed information.

*Third*, privacy turbulence can and does occur in privacy management. Although the original owner holds authorized recipients responsible for the care of their private information, there remains the possibility that the recipient will not follow or know the privacy rules held by the original owner. Consequently, recipients might not coordinate those rules with the original owner and are unable to follow them, recipients might choose not to follow them, or the recipients can make mistakes about appropriate privacy rules. In all cases, the result is privacy turbulence or a breakdown in the privacy management system (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002, 2010; Petronio & Durham, 2008).

The shared boundary between the student-athlete and the advisor may run smoothly when the individuals involved coordinate the privacy rules they use to determine granting or denying third-party access. When the original owner (student-athlete) and co-owner (advisor) coordinate mutually agreed upon privacy rules, this process determines who else can know or, in CPM terms, boundary linkage; how much they can know (boundary permeability); and how much independent control a co-owner has in making judgments about dissemination (boundary ownership privileges) (Petronio, 2002). While coordinated privacy rules lead to positive outcomes, there are also situations when breakdowns occur. For example, in the relationship between the student-athlete and advisor, privacy breakdowns can arise because the rules advisors use to regulate the privacy boundary for a student's shared privacy information could be inconsistent with the student's own rules. Often when these kinds of circumstances happen, advisors feel they are in a privacy dilemma. Understanding the way student-athletes and their advisors manage privacy helps to discover where potential difficulties may arise regarding privacy management and can function as a basis for advisor-training protocol for new ways to carry out the role of academic advisor.

### **Factors Influencing Privacy Regulation for Academic Advisors**

Student-athletes encounter challenges beyond academics, and it is common that they disclose information related to these challenges to their academic advisors because they established a trusting relationship. Although these disclosures occur, some advisors do not possess the necessary training=education to effectively deal with these issues (Brooks,

Etzel, & Ostrow, 1987). Because advisors do not have the expertise, they often rely on other campus support systems (e.g., counseling psychologists) to help student-athletes manage their complex personal issues (Gabbard & Halischank, 1993; Jolly, 2008). Though these support systems serve a valuable function, advisors nevertheless may find it challenging to persuade student-athletes to take advantage of campus support systems (e.g., professional counseling services). There are many reasons students do not turn to campus support systems, among them is the fear of social stigma regarding seeking professional counseling (Watson, 2003). Thus, advisors may find themselves in the position of deciding to whom, if anyone, they can reveal these difficult personal issues so the student-athlete gets help. In essence, there are at least three factors to consider in determining the issues related to athletic advising in an academic environment. One factor concerns privacy management of dilemmas that often arise for advisors involving expectations and loyalties. The second factor is related to confidentiality choices within the advisor-student relationship. The third factor affecting privacy management involves the advisor's privacy management role.

### ***Privacy Management Dilemmas***

Making decisions to protect confidences of student-athletes or to reveal the information they disclose to academic advisors presents a number of challenges. From previous research, we know advisors often feel "caught in the middle"—experiencing loyalty conflicts with both the student-athlete and the university. This tug of loyalty plays a predominant role in managing disclosed information student-athletes consider private and personal (J. Thompson, 2008). Even though student-athletes may not mark the information they tell their advisors as necessarily confidential, the nature of the student-advisor relationship often leads students to treat the interactions as though they were telling advisors information "in confidence" (Carodine et al., 2001; J. Thompson, 2008). Often the relationship is so strong that, despite being aware that the advisors are likely to have conflicting obligations, students still tend to treat the disclosure circumstances as establishing co-owned privacy boundaries with the presumption that the advisor has fiduciary responsibilities to care for the information (Petronio, 2002; Petronio & Reiersen, 2009).

Defining advisors as a confidant, in a trusting relationship, makes it easy to see that student-athletes likely expect their advisor (as a co-owner and confidant) to carefully regulate access to students' information. Students often presume that advisors are likely to necessarily use privacy rules for regulation that are consistent with the students' notion of privacy management (J. Thompson, 2008). Advisors find themselves in dilemmas when the privacy rules student-athletes expect advisors to follow contradicts obligations advisors have to coaches, directors, and university policies. Such dilemmas result in difficulty selecting the most effective path. These dilemmatic situations have many profiles. For example, private information shared by a student-athlete to an advisor may result in uncertainty about whether or not the advisor *should* reveal the information to the student-athlete's coach or parents. Likewise, the advisor may have difficulty judging whether to divulge the student-athlete's information to the advisor's supervisor, athletic administrator,

or to a faculty member working with the student-athlete. Decisions used to manage students' private information are often complex; as a consequence, advisors can feel unprepared to deal with the choices (J. Thompson, 2008).

As CPM theory predicts, underneath the privacy management process are the criteria serving as the basis for developing privacy rules and the implementation of the rules used to guide decision making for revealing and concealing (Petronio, 2002). Because rules often change depending on the context in which they are used, the interactions between advisors and student-athletes likely have idiosyncratic privacy *rules* that advisors employ to manage private information with student-athletes. Obviously, the potential ramifications of a management strategy may either positively or negatively influence the student-athlete, the advisor, and/or the athletic program. For that reason, we argue for a firmer grasp of the process of privacy management in this context.

### *Relational Context and Confidentiality Choices*

Student-athletes and advisors can develop a connection that is often defined similarly to a therapist-client relationship (Hosek & Thompson, 2009; J. Thompson, 2008; Watson, 2003). As such, there is an assumption that the client needs to share confidences with the therapist as part of counseling. Interestingly, the nature of this relationship calls for the client disclosing more private information than does the therapist (Petronio, 2002). It is common practice for therapists not to disclose much, if any, personal information. However, the therapist is expected (as part of their professional responsibility and by the client) to carefully regulate third-party access to the privacy boundary that surrounds the disclosed information belonging to the client. In much the same way, academic advisors manage private information revealed by the student-athlete. Nevertheless, there are several distinct differences. For example, a therapist-client privilege regarding prohibition of third-party revelations is not necessarily granted. In addition, advisors often do not have training to handle these complicated situations. Finally, advisors have to balance dual loyalties to student-athletes and to the responsibilities of their job. Consequently, there are specific challenges for advisors.

While advisors do not pretend to serve as professional therapists and student-athletes are unlikely to view themselves as clients, research suggests that the advisor interactions with the student-athlete is contingent on trust and confidentiality. As a result, the advisor may be privy to issues such as confessions of depression over athletic performance or role conflicts with others (Camp & Epps, 1986; Hinkle, 1996; Monaghan, 1985; Rhatigan, 1984; Thirer, Zackheim, & Summers, 1987), and pressures student-athletes face leading to harmful behaviors such as drug use and alcohol abuse (Carodine et al., 2001; Damm & Murray, 1996; Jordan & Denson, 1990).

Often out of the day-to-day pragmatic interactions, students grow dependent on academic advisors to help with personal and private issues (Carodine et al., 2001; Farber, Berano, & Capobianco, 2006; Jordan & Denson, 1990). Talking to the advisor is likely to provide some relief to the student-athlete, especially if the advisor shows empathy for the student-athlete's

troubles (Petronio, 2002). However, as CPM argues, once disclosures are made, the recipient becomes a co-owner of the information (Petronio & Durham, 2008), and co-owners have a certain degree of responsibility to care for the information they have been told.

### ***Advisors' Privacy Management Role***

When advisors receive confidential and private information from student-athletes, as confidants, they face decisions about how they will manage the privacy boundary surrounding the information. It is likely that student-athletes often assume some information will not be shared by the advisor without their permission. Because the management of the information is presumed to be handled in a particular way, student-athletes may not feel the need to negotiate privacy rules with the advisor. In other words, because the information is private to the students, they assume that their advisor would never share this information. However, researchers argue that confidants frequently make decisions to tell third parties whether or not they have negotiated permission to do so from the original owner (Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003; Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002; Petronio & Reiersen, 2009).

Given the dual loyalty advisors have to both the student-athlete and the institution, the advisors likely find this decision-point trying. Obviously, there are times when an advisor seeks permission to talk to someone else about a pertinent issue regarding the student-athlete. Nevertheless, there are also situations where advisors do not seek prior permission from the student-athlete. These third-party revelations frequently occur because the advisor is seeking help for the student-athlete and wants to determine the best route to help him=her before discussing the issue further. For example, if a student-athlete discloses to an advisor that he or she is suffering from depression, the advisor may not feel competent to address the situation compelling him or her to open the student-athlete's privacy boundary to a sports counseling psychologist to get help regarding advice to the student. Knowing that the sports counseling psychologist can help the student-athlete cope with this fragile psychological state may serve as the motivation for the advisor to make a decision to tell (Bunker & McGuire, 1985; Hinkle, 1996). In making this decision, the advisor takes license and institutes his=her own set of privacy rules perhaps overriding any negotiations the advisor and student-athlete may have had regarding the extent of the ownership rights the advisor was given. Because the student-athlete's private information was revealed to the sports counseling psychologist, the psychologist becomes one of the co-owners of the information (along with the student-athlete and the advisor) possibly without the knowledge of the student.

The Communication Privacy Management perspective predicts that the decision criteria used by a person drive the development of privacy rules that are used to regulate the disclosure to a third party (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002, 2010). The criteria that drive the development of privacy rules may depend on motivations a person has to reveal or conceal information, cultural values that influence privacy rules, the situation or context, and a risk-benefit ratio that people use to calculate implementation of privacy rules (Petronio, 2002). While there are a number of studies that have explored the role of decision criteria



in developing and implementation of privacy rules, the relationship among the privacy-rule criteria posited in CPM is not as clearly articulated (Petronio, 2010). In applications of CPM, the decision criteria and the implementation of the privacy rules lay at the base of an understanding for how co-owners (in this case, advisors) make decisions to disclose or protect student athletes' private information to third parties. Because it is unclear whether one or more privacy decision criteria serve to generate specific privacy rules in the context of athletic=academic advising, and to what extent these decision criteria impact choices advisors use for privacy management with their student-athletes, the following research questions guide the present study:

RQ1: Which privacy decision criteria do academic advisors believe influence their choices about implementation of privacy rules to regulate access to student-athletes' private confidential information?

RQ2: How do academic advisors perceive the privacy decision criteria that affect their privacy rule choices to manage student-athletes' private confidential information?

## Method

### *Participation Criteria*

The participants were ( $N = 37$ ) current and former academic advisors of college and university student-athletes representative of NCAA 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.<sup>3</sup> The NCAA regulates such issues as eligibility and conduct, education, health and safety, and personal welfare of the student-athlete (<http://www.ncaa.org>). All three divisions of NCAA institutional eligibility were selected to provide a range of experiences in different types of educational environments and athletic programs. Participation threshold required a minimum of 2 years of experience as an academic advisor in NCAA Divisions I, IAA, II, and III institutions. Participation for former advisors included no more than 5 years post-active advising. Of those meeting the requirements and volunteering to participate, 22 were current advisors and 15 were former advisors. In terms of gender and race, 21 males and 16 females participated and 17 were African American and 20 identified as Caucasian. The mean age of the participants was 35 years old. Participants were recruited through an email announcement and invitation to participate. Using a snowball sampling design, those advisors responding to the email announcement were asked to invite other advisors they knew to be at an NCAA Division I, IAA, II, or III institution (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

### *Data Collection and Analysis Procedures*

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data for this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The respondents were asked to respond to 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," "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?" and "What have you done with information revealed to you from a student-athlete during a meeting?"

Using CPM theoretical predictions to guide identification of themes, the procedure of analysis for the data depended on a combination of Smith's (1995) thematic analysis method and Owen's approach (1984). Initially, each transcript was read by the researchers to gain familiarity with the textual data. The transcripts were read a second time to identify emerging themes. To enhance rigor, Owen's tripartite method of thematic interpretation was also used. According to Owen, a theme should meet three criteria: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness. Given thematic analysis is iterative, as themes were identified within the textual data collected, a determination was made of whether the themes clustered conceptually and represented aspects of CPM theory continuing until theoretical saturation occurred (Creswell, 1998; Smith, 1995). Thus, when observed comparable patterns and themes did not result in any additional categories, the analysis process concluded. In the final step, a "memo" (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 193) was developed by joining the derived themes with quotations or exemplar statements given by participants. As a result of the analysis, the data yielded two levels of themes, primary and secondary, as reported in the results section.

To test the rigor of this analysis, a collaborative data conference with five additional researchers trained in CPM theory and the interpretive paradigm was conducted. In the 2.5-hour data conference, the scholars worked together to check and refine the analysis. In addition, the results were tested through member checking (Creswell, 1998). Member checking is the process by which researchers share the results with the participants from whom they collected the data to "verify the viability of [the] interpretations" (Harter, Leeman, Noranda, Young, & Rawlins, 2008, p. 431). The first author completed member checks with 26 out of the 37 participants and summarized the analysis for them. The participants indicated agreement with the analysis as representative of their experiences. Taken together, these processes help establish validity and reliability of the themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## **Results and Interpretation**

Two goals represent the mission of this research and are reflected in the two research questions. The first goal of this research was to discover which decision criteria for privacy management impacted choices of privacy rules used by advisors to regulate revealing or concealing the private information the student-athletes told them in confidence. The data analysis showed that for this first research question, one recurring primary theme emerged suggesting an interrelationship between two privacy decision criteria for judging privacy rules advisors used regarding student-athletes' disclosures. The second goal and corresponding research question aimed to determine the kind of privacy rules used when certain decision criteria prevailed. In response to this second goal, three recurring primary themes emerged reflecting the kinds of privacy rules used in connection to the decision criteria, including calculations of risks and motivations to reveal and conceal.

For each of these primary themes, several secondary themes suggest specific reasons for revealing or concealing and these are discussed in turn.

### ***Privacy Decision Criteria for Academic Advisors***

For research question one, this study finds that both motivations and risk-benefit relationships function in a partnership to determine the kinds of privacy rules academic advisors use to tell or protect student-athletes' disclosed private information. Unlike many other studies using CPM, this research finds that both motivations and risk-benefit ratios (as opposed to one or the other) serve in tandem as the dominant criteria for implementing privacy rules determining revealing and concealing the student-athlete's private information (Petronio, 2002, 2010; Petronio & Durham, 2008). The results illustrate the particular way in which both motivations and risk-benefit criteria articulate serving as grounds for developing and selecting privacy rules in this context. In the original thesis outlining CPM theory, Petronio (2002) did not specify how decision criteria might articulate or coalesce, only that they would likely do so. In general, she notes that

These criteria alternatively or in conjunction take the foreground thus influencing rule making, as the others remain in the background having less immediate information over rule generation. However, each contributes to the fundamental production of rules people use to regulate their privacy boundaries. (p. 39)

However, Petronio (2002) hypothesized that calculations of risk and benefit may be a criterion (unlike the others) that is evident in most, if not all, judgments about privacy rules for granting or denying access. The findings from this study give structure to the proposal made by Petronio regarding the interface of risk-benefit ratios and other decision criteria and provide an important finding supporting CPM theory.

This research shows that within the context of academic advisors with student-athletes, motivations are seen as related to choices of privacy rules for advisors. But, the risk-benefit calculus appears to temper the final privacy management decisions that advisors make about revealing or concealing confidential information told to them by student-athletes. As a result, this study discovers that both motivations and a risk-benefit calculus jointly function in particular ways for privacy management of academic advisors and their student-athletes. Over and above the results that identify privacy regulation for advisors, the study also uncovers a promising connection between two kinds of decision criteria that drive privacy-rule choices. This finding provides an important explication of the initial proposal Petronio (2002) made regarding criteria for privacy-rule development.

### ***Privacy Decision Criteria and Resultant Privacy Rules***

For research question two, the present study shows the conditions when specific types of privacy rules are used by the advisors to regulate student-athletes' disclosed private information. This second research question also allows for a better understanding of how the

interface of motivations and risk frame the reasons for either deciding to reveal or deciding to protect the student-athlete's private disclosures. Three recurring primary themes reflecting the motivation=risk decision criteria leading to revealing rules or protection rules were found. First, a theme representing the advisors' use of *privacy rules for revealing* was largely predicated on motivations to share student-athlete disclosures because these advisors were unwilling to risk ignoring job responsibilities. Two secondary themes represent specific orientations toward making these disclosures including revealing based on job responsibilities for the good of the whole and for the good of the students. Second, a primary theme representing the advisors' *privacy rules for concealing* was guided by motivations to take risks not to tell out of either perceived obligations to the student-athletes or to give the student-athletes a safe space to learn personal accountability. Three secondary themes emerged suggesting concealing (1) out of relational obligations, (2) to encourage student-athletes to be accountable, and (3) to conceal as a way to preserve the job.

A third recurring theme was also found that captured the *ramifications of dilemma choices* for these advisors who often found the consequences of making the choice to reveal or conceal student-athletes' private information difficult to manage (Petronio, 2000; Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003). Although risks versus benefits permeate the findings on motivations, this study also identifies a particular finding regarding risk. The results show that the perceptions of risk versus benefit for advisors was indicated in the theme of "*feeling caught*." Because of dual loyalties, advisors often felt caught in the middle between their role as advisors to student-athletes and their role as representative of the university or institution that includes responsibilities to the administration. For this theme, the privacy rules guiding behavior revolved around only one issue: being caught with the potential of experiencing negative outcomes.

### ***Calculations of Risks and Motivations to Reveal***

Because CPM predicts that individuals believe they own their private information and have a right to control third-party access, when an authorized co-owner independently makes a decision to divulge the original owner's information, it often risks the relationship if the original owner has not given permission (Petronio, 2010; Petronio & Bantz, 1991; Petronio & Durham, 2008). These findings indicate a particular relationship between risk and benefits for advisors that affected their motivations to reveal or conceal student-athletes' information. These data show that, although the advisors recognized the risk to their relationship with the student-athletes, there were two recurring themes where advisors were motivated to reveal the students' information without negotiating the student-athletes' privacy boundaries to gain permission. Both these themes concerned issues having to do with their job duties as academic advisors. The first condition occurred when advisors justified the conditions under which they made a decision to reveal student-athlete confidences as part of fulfilling their job responsibilities based on an obligation to "the good of the whole institution." They also revealed without negotiating privacy rules risking their relationship with the students when they encountered situations where they felt obligated to seek outside expertise to fulfill their job responsibilities "for the good of the student."

*Job responsibilities for the good of the whole*

For these advisors, the most frequently occurring theme regarding a decision to break confidences of student-athletes concerned a student's academic performance. These disclosures were often made without directly consulting the student-athlete because the advisors believed that, aside from the way that the student-athletes might have felt about keeping that information securely between the advisor and student, it was the advisor's job responsibility to disclose this information. Ironically, student-athletes were informed of the policy to disclose issues about academic performance as they entered the athletic programs. Yet, because of the relationship advisors had with these student-athletes, advisors often felt uncomfortable making the disclosures. While advisors tended to err on the side of honoring their job responsibilities, the relational ties they felt to the student-athlete often resulted in exploring all possible options before having to disclose.

For example, one advisor reported that he realized that disclosing the student-athlete's poor academic performance was necessary because there were potential ramifications for the team and coach. Clearly, making this revelation was expected of the advisor in terms of his job responsibilities and obligations to the institution. Not doing so was a risk he understood. Nevertheless, before revealing the student's poor academic performance, he tried to address the problems. The advisor stated:

I remember this one . . . star athlete she wasn't going to make it [academically]; you know she was going to be kicked out of [this institution]. Unfortunately this is one of those situations where we've kind of come to the end of the road and there are no other options. So in this case, I had to tell [the coach about the student-athlete's academic standing]. I mean you just had to be professional about it. Because the coach is going to be counting on [the student-athlete] and the coach needs to then start making other recruiting efforts to find somebody to fit [the student-athlete's] bill for the next season. So if we're not open with the coach then he's not going to have the proper personnel, you know, for his team. (P2:28)<sup>4</sup>

In this example, the advisor used a privacy access rule that reflected a set of professional expectations for situations leading to disclosure rather than protection of the student-athlete's private information regarding her grades. However difficult this choice was for the advisor, his decision was predicated on the assumption that the institution (e.g., the coach, supervisors, and university administrators) or "the good of the whole" must be taken into account. Thus, the advisor felt that it was the only choice that made sense for the athletic program, for his position, and the reputation of the institution.

*Job responsibilities for the good of the students*

Advisors discussed occasions when they linked others into the privacy boundary around student-athletes' disclosed information because they did not feel confident they had the needed expertise to help student-athletes deal with certain private issues. Seeking consultations from professionals is typically considered a good option for most athletic programs. However, when the advisor decides not to ask permission from the student-athlete

first, there can be potential problems. Unlike the more clearly articulated structure provided by the NCAA rules and most universities and colleges requiring disclosure of academic performance, the enlistment of professional help is a more difficult privacy issue. The privacy boundary lines are more unclear for determining situations where a confidant (i.e., advisor) reveals such private information a student-athlete has disclosed. These advisors told us that they had difficulty making these choices and encountered consequences for making independent decisions about revealing. Yet, the advisors' initial judgment was often predicated on making choices for "the good of the student." In CPM terms, this type of situation is an example of privacy turbulence where privacy expectations are intentionally violated (even though advisors did so with good intentions) leading to disruptions in the management of private information (Petronio, 2002, 2010).

In these cases, advisors essentially appropriate control by making independent decisions about contacting a professional while leaving the student-athlete without input on the decision. In many ways, the choice to seek professional help among these advisors appeared to be in seeking assistance for the student-athlete in making productive decisions, sometimes relieving the advisors of felt responsibilities that appeared beyond their comfort level. Yet, from the student-athletes' perspective, it may have been perceived as a breach of confidentiality (Petronio & Reiersen, 2009). The advisors in this study tended to carefully make the decision to link the professionals into the student-athlete's privacy boundary when student-athletes confided private information about very specific issues, such as depression and eating disorders. In this first example, the advisor described one case where a student-athlete disclosed about feeling depressed. The advisor stated:

I had a student who was battling depression. The student was having some issues, you know, with whether or not this was worth it. And I expressed that they could talk to me if they wanted to but I felt that our sports psychologist was much better qualified. And so I shared the student's information with [the sports psychologist] and so I knew that [the student-athlete] would be seeing a sports psychologist from time to time. (P20: 428)

When probed why she sought the help of the sports psychologist, she explained:

I got a psychologist involved because it was so serious I felt that it was beyond me to feel like I could help him. I felt like this would be something that he would have issues with, like learning how to cope. (P20: 429)

This advisor told a sports psychologist what the student-athlete disclosed regarding his feelings to obtain help coping with his depression. The advisor felt uncertain about needed expertise to help the student-athlete manage the sadness and hopelessness he felt. The advisor reasoned that making the student-athlete's privacy boundary permeable by telling the sports psychologist the problems would possibly prevent the depression from becoming more advanced and serious. The advisor reasoned that, without expert advice, the student-athlete could have engaged in unsafe behaviors, such as overconsumption of alcohol or drug use. However, not consulting with the student-athlete beforehand risked

possible damage to the trust relationship the advisor established with the student. Outcomes on the part of the student, such as rejection and anger about the violation of confidentiality, may also be a possibility when the student is not consulted prior to disclosing to the psychologist.

While these advisors turned to professionals for help, there were times when some advisors tried to first address the problem on their own. For example, one advisor reflected on an instance when a student-athlete was experiencing romantic relationship problems with his girlfriend and the student-athlete seemed to display signs of depression. The advisor stated:

I had a young student-athlete who came to this university [and] was quite loved [back home by a young lady]. [He] came here and [the] young lady's love was not as strong . . . as he thought it was and as a result he revealed to me he was ready to commit suicide . . . . I could see the progression of this really affecting him in his particular sport. And I talked and talked and at that point where there seem to have been nothing prevailing in terms of finding a solution, I contacted some of the professional people at my place of work and decided to share some things with them that I am receiving some telltale signs of things not being in order and I wished that they would generally do a counseling type of session. (P26: 507)

When probed why he felt the need link a professional counselor into the student's privacy boundary, he explained:

I saw [that] the individual [was] concerned. I saw the individual overly concerned. I saw the individual hurt because of that concern. Everything that I was doing that was trying to help bring comfort to the individual was not working and I needed some help because I found this person going down. And so as this person's academic counselor, I felt that I was supposed to do everything that I could to assist this person. And I was going to involve my resources that I had in order to do it. (P26: 507)

As this excerpt illustrates, from the advisor's point of view, for the good of the student-athlete, it was his job responsibility to prevent the student-athlete from falling further into a mental decline and enlisting the help of a professional counselor was considered the best option.

### ***Calculations of Risks and Motivations to Conceal***

As this research found with the themes for revealing, likewise the themes for using privacy rules to conceal or protect information by academic advisors illustrated the connection between motivations and risks as the basis for choices about managing a student-athlete's confidential disclosures. There are *three* recurring themes that represent conditions in which concealing took place for these advisors. *The first theme* represents situations where advisors felt an obligation to protect a student-athletes' information to preserve their relationship. *The second theme* reflects the use of privacy protection to encourage

the opportunity for students to learn accountability for their actions. *The third theme* represents concealing because the advisors did not wish to jeopardize their jobs. Thus, in this circumstance, the advisors received confidential information or witnessed inappropriate behavior but chose to remain silent rather than to report the problem.

#### *Concealing out of relational obligations*

Advisors often indicated that they decided not to disclose to a third party in an effort to maintain the relationship that they formed with the student-athlete. They preserved this relationship by guarding the trust they established with the student-athlete in situations such as when student-athletes may have wanted to transfer to another school or quit their sport. However, there were times when not revealing the information caused the advisors to feel caught between honoring the student-advisor relationship and fulfilling expectations for full disclosure that some coaches held. For example, an advisor described a situation when a coach became irate with him because he did not tell the coach that a student-athlete confided the desire to transfer to another school. The advisor explained:

The coach called me into his office and wanted to know why I did not make him aware [of the fact that the student-athlete wanted to transfer] sooner. And I said, "Well first of all coach I'm an academic advisor, students come to talk to me about a lot of different things." I said, "Most importantly what is said between me and a student-athlete is confidential until a student tells me it's okay to divulge that information." And I'm pressing from my end and so he wants to know why [I can't divulge that information] and I said, "I can't do that. I have to get to know these kids and I have to have these kids trust me and if I come back behind the students back and tell you then I've essentially destroyed my relationship with them. Now you may not understand, but that's just how it works." (P8: 164)

In this example, the advisor recognized that giving the coach access to the fact that the student-athlete confided a desire to transfer to another school would be problematic for the student. Because the student-athlete disclosed this information on the basis of feeling the advisor was trustworthy, revealing the student-athlete's desire to transfer would compromise an implicit set of coordinated and consented privacy rules held by both the student-athlete and the advisor. The advisor realized that revealing the information had the potential to harm their established relationship and did not appear to feel that keeping these confidences would jeopardize his job. To maintain the relationship, he retained the level of trust with the student-athlete by establishing a thick boundary around the information—a boundary that did not allow for direct disclosure to the coach.

#### *Concealing encouraging student-athlete accountability*

The second reason advisors in this study concealed student-athletes' private information was to encourage them to take responsibility and learn how to be accountable for their actions. Often doing so not only helped the student-athlete learn to cope with his or her own problems, it also meant that the advisors were more easily able to remain objective.



Sustaining objectivity also helped avert playing the role of mediator, for instance, between the student-athlete and coach. By encouraging student-athletes to remain in full control of managing their private information by choosing when, where, how much, and to whom to reveal it, the students were able to use their own privacy rules to judge how permeable they wanted to make their privacy boundaries.

The first example focuses on times when student-athletes expressed their dissatisfaction with such issues as the playing time their coaches assigned, or they were unhappy about some conditions for which they wanted the advisor to intervene so they would not have to deal directly with the coach. The advisors, however, explained that they were often motivated not to take control over managing this information for the students and were not inclined to tell others that the students were dissatisfied, frustrated, or disgruntled in some way. Instead, the advisors believed that the students should take responsibility for revealing their own information in these circumstances. This advisor offered an example, stating:

There were a number of occasions where an athlete felt like they were being wronged because they weren't getting a chance, or they weren't on the field, or coach was giving favoritism to this athlete who in their eyes was not nearly as good as them. Those were constant frustrations that you heard. So I would listen but then right away I want to redirect and say, "Look, let me clarify. I've got nothing to do with your playing time. And if you are uncomfortable with it you probably need to confront that coach directly, or if you don't feel comfortable confronting that coach, [confront] somebody on that staff that you can talk to." That's about all you can do, that's about all I did. (P29: 550)

In this situation, the advisor avoided being a mediator between the student-athletes and the coaches. Making the student-athletes accountable enabled them to be in a position to get a direct explanation from the coach about their lack of playing time, thereby owning the responsibility for disclosing the information and negotiating the outcome. Occasionally, individuals want others to take over the responsibility for making a disclosure because it leaves them room to see how the information is received before they have to deal with the consequences (Petronio, 2002). In the situations between student-athletes and their advisors, the advisors seem unwilling to take on that liability because they believed it was important for the students to learn how best to manage these interactions themselves and to become more accountable. Doing so also minimizes the possibility of having the advisor function as a mediator between students and coaches, for example, and is perhaps a strategy advisors use to reduce instances of being caught in the middle.

### *Concealing preserving the job*

While the two above reasons for concealing may be considered positive reasons for protecting student confidences, this third theme illustrates that there are also situations in which advisors err on the side of silence to protect themselves rather than help the student-athletes. In this study, advisors reported opting to conceal rather than reveal a student-athlete's private disclosure surrounding verbal and/or physical abuse from coaches.

This theme represents a complicated and troubling set of reasons for concealing. An advisor stated:

I had student-athletes tell me about a track coach who had been very abusive to some of the women on the team. He's gone on to say that women aren't good for anything but sex, that they should lay their legs wide open and just lay there. I was told that track coach was being abusive physically to some student-athletes and touch them, not sexually but, but physically trying to get his point across being verbally abusive, and crossed the line to being physically abusive. He actually laid his hands on a male student-athlete. Student-athletes revealed that to me. (P34: 644)

As this excerpt illustrates, the advisor assessed the situation between the student-athletes and this particular coach as being extremely inappropriate. It seemed clear that the coach displayed a decidedly ill-mannered breach of professional decorum. While the advisor recognized the seriousness of the situation and seemed to understand that the coach's behavior created a toxic environment for the students, as well as the team overall, the advisor chose to remain silent. In this case, it does not appear the advisor was sworn to secrecy in any direct statement by the students. This example illustrates the choice to keep co-owned privacy boundaries closed, erecting thick boundary walls. However, it is not apparent whether the student-athlete told the advisor hoping for exactly the opposite response. In a follow-up response, it seems clear that the advisor presumed that the student-athletes wanted him to make the disclosure so he or she would not have to do so. Thus, when asked how he managed the privacy boundary surrounding the private information from the student-athletes, this advisor responded that he wanted to stay out of the middle. He did not want to be in between the student-athletes and the coach who engaged in the negative behavior. As a consequence, the advisor told the student-athletes making the disclosure to "take responsibility" and to reveal the information to someone else (e.g., athletic administrator). The advisor chose strategies to protect him from being caught in the middle where potential controversy could have erupted, perhaps jeopardizing his job. In comparing all three themes for concealing, the first theme focusing on sustaining a relationship errs on the side of advisors defining the student-athlete relationship to weigh more heavily in choices to conceal when the issues appear to interfere less with job functioning. In the second concealing theme, the focus is on helping student-athletes take responsibility for managing their own problems. For the third concealing theme, the judgment seems to have more to do with preservation for the advisor. However, the example underscores the fact that student-athletes are often powerless to cope with abusive adults, especially when there are issues such as athletic scholarships at stake.

### ***Ramifications of Dilemma Choices***

A third theme that emerged reflects the consequences of choices that the academic advisors made regarding revealing or concealing the confidential information disclosed by the student-athletes. This theme illustrates the reason that academic advisors might feel

caught in the middle of competing loyalties to students, themselves, and to the institution they represent. There are many examples, but the following excerpt illustrates a situation where an advisor was motivated to risk revealing information she felt was pertinent to the institution and the student-athletes. Her description shows her initial choices, ramifications for those choices, and consequences that she claimed influenced her current personal disclosure policies. In the following example, an advisor shared a compelling story about a negative experience that convinced her of the high risks involved with disclosing inappropriate behavior on behalf of students. The advisor stated:

I did have a situation where I was in a group meeting with a specific team and one of my colleagues and [the student-athletes] started telling us how uncomfortable some of them were with their coach because [the coach] was very religious and he was sort of pounding their religious beliefs on them. And they also said that [the coach] was very homophobic and that he might have a concern for any woman on the team who was gay and how they would be going to hell [if they were gay]. My assistant and I were sitting in front of the room and we were stunned that they were telling us this. And I said to the group, "This is information that I need to take up to the athletic director." And I said, "I'm asking you right now, do you understand that I'm taking this up to the athletic director?" And they said, "Yes." And I said "okay."

But what happened when the kids were interviewed is that they denied [how their coach was treating them]. So there I am looking like a complete idiot and feeling like I was really thrown under the bus to be quite honest with you. Cause I went out on a huge limb myself because I had had a relationship with the coach. And now here is this coach thinking that I was throwing him under the bus. But [the student-athletes] had been so adamant during that meeting and they had been so clear during that meeting. [The student-athletes] had recalled verbatim conversations that they had had with the coach preaching to them certain types of religious practices. And being incredibly homophobic and unkind. But when [the student-athletes] were interviewed then apparently there was no problem! So [I] get to look like the idiot, and the coaches were incredibly unhappy with me, I felt awful, and I really resented the [student-athletes] to be quite honest with you! I resented them and I couldn't wait until they all graduated and got the heck out of here because I thought that they really, really violated my professionalism and me going to bat for them and that really turned me off. And I don't know that I would get as involved again. (P19: 420-421)

When asked what the advisor meant by "I don't know that I would get as involved again," she explained that she would simply make it the student-athlete's responsibility to share the private information with the proper person rather than doing it herself.

Evidently, because this advisor made the decision to disclose the student-athletes' private information in this instance, she ended up in the middle of a controversy between the student-athletes and the coach. She obviously regretted taking this action because, in the end, it made her vulnerable and she lost some credibility given that the student-athletes changed their story.

As these themes illustrate, the privacy rules and management options that advisors use have pertinent implications for the way student-athlete information is understood or

known to others. The line between wanting to help student-athletes learn how to manage their own information and judging what might serve as protection for the advisors or student so they do not get caught in the middle is often an ethical conundrum for advisors. Yet, many of these decisions have a long-lasting impact and affect the advisor, student-athlete, athletic department, and the university as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the present study was to understand and describe the criteria academic advisors use to determine the privacy rules they use to regulate revealing or concealing private confidential information disclosed by student-athletes. We found a number of unexpected issues that illustrate many of the theoretical claims that CPM makes about privacy management. In this regard, this research points to very specific paths regarding how CPM can help discern complicated privacy management issues. Specifically, the research in this study provides a better understanding of how two different privacy decision criteria might articulate in tandem to produce a particular outcome. Thus, when motivations and the level of risk a person is willing to take as a co-owner of someone else's information function in conjunction with each other, we see that certain privacy rules are selected to attain a goal that balances the two criteria. Consequently, the advisors in this study were willing to risk revealing the students' confidential information because they defined doing so as part of their job when it proved important for the good of the whole program and when it proved good for the student in particular.

Further, calculations that interfaced motivations and risks to concealing confidential information belonging to the student occurred for advisors when they have a greater sense of obligation to the relationship with the student than other factors, when they wanted to encourage the student-athlete to learn accountability for their own private information, and when they felt they needed to conceal to protect their own job. In these cases, the same advisors were unwilling to take risks by revealing and concealed pertinent information when the situations shifted the balance to interfering with the security of their job. They also concealed when they perceived the relational obligations to be more important than making a particular disclosure about a student's confidential information. In addition, the advisors concealed thereby promoting student accountability and responsibility of their own information.

Finally, the research in this study shows that the motivational and risk criteria interface is likely to also produce ramifications that lead to dilemmas of choice. Again, this study provides evidence for theoretical claims that Communication Privacy Management makes and adds a critical dimension to the substantiation and verification of principles within the CPM theory. As indicated earlier, CPM argues that privacy management is particularly difficult for recipients who are co-owners of someone else's private information. When people make choices to reveal or conceal another person's confidences, they must cope with the consequences of that decision (e.g., Petronio & Martin, 1986). This research verifies this point within the context of academic advisors who work with college student-athletes.

Advisors must function as confidants to student-athletes as part of the job responsibilities while abiding by the expectations that the institution sets up for people in these positions, including following NCAA rules. Occasionally these roles and goals are incompatible, thereby making the job of an academic advisor quite challenging.

This research offers unique insight into the difficult balance advisors must strike. Further, we also find that, in many cases, there are consequences for any choices the advisors make in decisions regarding confidential information. We see that the advisors talked frequently about feeling “caught in the middle”—feeling conflicted about loyalty to the student and to the institution (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991).

The data from these advisors provide a window into why they may feel this tug. Knowing the way that advisors understand the choices they made to protect or tell confidential information students tell them is critical to many different kinds of outcomes. Treating disclosures that students make as “ok” to tell others without getting permission from the students is a potential problem. The problem is exacerbated when the student has different ideas about how the advisor should keep confidences. Even when the information, such as grades, is explicitly identified as information that has to be told to university personnel, the students may assume that because of the trusting relationship they have with advisors, they would be told when or if the information is disclosed.

Clearly, the effect advisors have when they disclose student-athletes’ private information has the potential to be significant for the student, advisor, and athletic program. Learning how the advisors make choices can help us understand the way they calculate revealing and concealing a student’s confidential information. Doing so gives insights into where training is necessary and highlights when guidance is needed for advisors. This research isolates several critical areas that can help universities and colleges with athletic programs consider privacy management skill building and recognition of the impact privacy violations have not only on students but on advisors as well. This information can also potentially help both administrators and athletic directors set some guidelines to better facilitate the role of athletic/academic advising.

## Notes

- [1] The terms *academic advisor* and *advisor* are used interchangeably in this study.
- [2] The first author is a former academic advisor of college student-athletes with considerable experience working with athletics in multiple universities. During the interviews, the majority of participants revealed that taking part in the interviews prompted them to be reflective on privacy issues in their interactions with student-athletes. We noted that most of the advisors expressed that they have received little training to address privacy and confidentiality issues of student athletes.
- [3] According to the NCAA website (<http://www.ncaa.org>), NCAA Division I institutions sponsor at least seven sports for men and seven for women with two team sports for each gender. Division I-AA, now referred to as FCS or NCAA Football Championship Subdivision within Division I, for these data represents universities who do not meet the minimum attendance requirements that is expected of the Football Bowl Subdivision. NCAA Division II institutions have to sponsor at least five sports for men and five for women with two team sports for each gender. NCAA Division III institutions

have to sponsor at least five sports for men and five of women, with two team sports for each gender. However, Division III athletics feature student-athletes who receive no financial aid related to their athletic ability and athletic departments are staffed and funded like any other department in the university unlike NCAA Division I and II universities (<http://www.ncaa.org>).

- [4] Following each of the excerpts from the interviews, we include participant number and page number(s) of the interview transcript.

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