The Bison Way: Organizational Unifiers and Values as a Driver of Success

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Introduction and Literature Review

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Heraclitus, the Greek Philosopher said, "Change is the only constant in life." In the modern world, the ever-increasing speed of change is often discussed. Technology, communication, industry, and employment are just a few of the areas used to highlight the rapidly changing world. Building and sustaining a culture of success in an environment of constant change is no small feat. The ability to adapt, innovate, respond to change, and sustain success over an extended period is rare. Organizations that display the ability to maintain success in an environment of complexity and change are worthy of study. Examining the process of how these entities organize is particularly important. Interactions within these organizations lead to patterns of behaviour that emerge over time and contribute to the success of the organization (Eoyang, 2001). These emergent patterns advance the individual and group goals and create coherence that leads to success. Understanding what causes these emergent patterns can help leaders influence teams and systems in creating coherent behaviour that breeds success (Eoyang, 2001).

College football, in the United States, is a very competitive environment with significant pressure on athletes, coaches, and administrators to produce results. Football accounts for nearly half of the generated revenue for Departments of Athletics at the Division I level across all sports (Adler et al., 2012). Change is a constant in college football that makes success even more challenging. Success is fleeting at this level when the pressure to succeed is pushed in an environment of change. The North Dakota State Bison (NDSU Bison) have been a model of success in an environment of change. Over the last twelve years, the program has won 9 of 12 National Championships, had three quarterbacks drafted to the NFL, and have lost only 14

games. One of the most impressive things about the Bison football program is that they have

succeeded, despite having had three head coaches over this time.

Literature on coaching succession shows that it is very difficult for successful sports

programs to maintain success with a new head coach. Adler, Berry, and Doherty (2012) found

that in programs that appear to be most favourable for change, leadership replacement is

detrimental. Stability in a program is a key element of building a successful culture. Programs

need to be successful in recruiting new players to replace graduates. Changing coaches can

make recruiting significantly more challenging and influence the success of the program. Given

this data, the sustained success of the NDSU football program is very impressive.

This study examined the NDSU Bison football program to gain insight into factors that

contributed to their unique success. It examined the role the Athletics Director, Head Coach,

coaching staff, and player leadership played in building this culture of sustained success. This

thesis then applied these lessons to sports leadership and educational leadership. College

football is a dynamic game with many interactions and factors influencing the success of teams.

Complexity theory was used to examine the interactions within the Bison that influenced their

successful environment. Specifically, Eoyang's (2001) Container - Difference - Exchange

Model (CDE) was used to examine the interactions and conditions that shaped Bison football.

Significance of the Study

Success in the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) is extremely difficult to sustain.

When a program can sustain success over a decade, despite multiple coaching changes and with

yearly player turnover, it is clear something special is occurring. The Bison football team has

won three more championships in 12 seasons than the next closest program has ever won

(NCAA, 2021). During this time, the Bison have defeated six opponents from the Football Bowl

Subdivision (FBS) in the NCAA (NCAA, 2020). FBS programs have access to more recruits, larger budgets, and play elite competition on a more consistent basis. Small schools like North Dakota State should struggle to compete with these programs, yet they have consistently overcome the odds to beat FBS programs. Finally, NDSU has developed three quarterbacks that were drafted into the NFL, two of which were top selections in the first round of the draft. This time frame represents a special moment in the history of sports that needed to be studied and documented. When a small school, with a relatively small budget, can succeed at a high level for this length of time it is worthy of study. Many insights on leadership, culture building, and organizational management were learned from studying this unique moment in time.

Many studies from American institutions look at sports leadership and culture development. Few studies have examined the success of an American sports team from a Canadian perspective. While the two countries do have commonalities, there are unique aspects to each culture regarding the leadership and organizational success in sports. I believe that examining an American organization from a Canadian perspective has provided valuable insight into leadership and culture development.

As an administrator, it is important to study leadership from multiple perspectives and experiences. Different fields can provide unique leadership approaches that can be applied within the field of education. Examining an elite sports culture and applying the research to the field of educational leadership has provided important insights and implications for administrators. The data from this study, when applied, can positively influence leadership practices within the field of education.

Finally, few studies have looked at sports organizations through the lens of Complexity Theory. Football is a unique sport as many players, position groups, and coaches contribute to

the success of the team. These moving parts must organize and connect to ensure the success of

the team. If one area is not functioning at a high level, it will harm other areas that are

functioning at high levels. The application of Eoyang's (2001) CDE model to a sports

organization has provided valuable insight about the process of unifying diverse groups towards

a common goal across time. Examination of a successful program through the lens of

Complexity Theory has contributed valuable information on building success in a complex

adaptive environment.

Contribution to Knowledge, Theory, and Practice

Through the knowledge gained in this study, the researcher has provided insight into

coaching behaviours, leadership development practices, and strategies that influence complex

systems in organizing, adapting, and succeeding. According to the CDE model, systems that are

successful must differentiate themselves from the surrounding environment (Eoyang, 2001, p.

48).   This study examined how NDSU developed boundaries and unifying values that

contributed to high levels of success. Football programs have tremendous diversity. This

diversity is represented in the various position groups, players from across the country, coaches,

and administration staff. All groups must be unified and functioning with coherence for the

system to succeed. This diversity forces self-organization to occur in an attempt to overcome

differences and succeed (Eoyang, 2001, p. 36).   If differences are too great, teams cannot adapt

and succeed. Factors that contributed to navigating difference and diversity at a high level were

studied. Finally, transfer and exchange of information and ideas that bind the Bison organization

together was studied. Exchanges are necessary to bind the organization into a whole (Eoyang,

2001, p. 38). Binding the unit into a whole requires the successful interaction of Containers (C)

and Differences (D). This study has provided valuable insight into communication and

information sharing strategies that allow organizations to connect into a cohesive and highly functioning whole.

Background

Sports and leadership have been defining elements in my growth as an individual and professional. When I commenced my graduate studies in Educational Administration, I was passionate about pursing research is sports leadership that could be applied to my context as an educator, coach, and administrator.   The desire to pursue research in this field reflects the merging of a variety of influences in my life. The main influences being exposure to strong leaders in my youth, participation in sports (particularly football), and my choice to pursue a career in education. All these influences have contributed to my passion for leadership and gaining knowledge to share on effective leadership practices. This section outlines the contribution of each of these factors to my research.

My grandfather was a Member of Parliament (MP) for nearly 32 years representing Brandon-Souris. While he passed before I was born, his legacy of leadership greatly influenced my life. Growing up, I spent a significant amount of time with my grandmother. In this time together, she would share stories of a life spent in politics and leadership. These stories piqued my curiosity in leadership and awakened an awareness to the influence of leaders on others. My family was very active in the community and politics, which afforded me the opportunity to observe many leaders and how they used their leadership to influence others. Specifically, I observed commonalities among strong leaders in terms of their communication, integrity, and ability to connect with people. The greatest influence of these was communication. As a young child my report cards consistently said things like, "Robert is a quiet boy, I wish he would speak up and share his thoughts." When I was 16 years old, I made the decision to put my observations

into action and apply these communication skills. I ran for student council, entered public

speaking competitions, and pursued leadership positions on my sports teams. The

communication skills I gained from these observations have significantly influenced my

leadership abilities.

A second area of influence in my life was sport. Growing up, my brother and I always

had an interest in the sport of football. Despite not having the ability to play football in a league,

we always played at home both indoors and outdoors. My first opportunity to play football came

when I started high school at Crocus Plains Regional Secondary School. There was an

announcement for students interested in playing the sport to attend a meeting and sign up. This

sparked a lifelong passion for the game of football. I loved how there was a role for every type

of athlete and the need for a large group of diverse individuals to come together in working

towards a common goal. If one aspect of the team is struggling in football, it can cause many

problems for the whole team. Through hard work and consistency, I was afforded the

opportunity to play at university for two seasons. During my time in football, I played on teams

that won no games and teams that went undefeated and won provincial championships. A

common underlying theme in both successful teams and weak teams was leadership and

communication. During my Grade 11 season, a defining moment that greatly influenced my

view on leadership and communication occurred. We were a competitive team in a tight game.

The other team was driving the ball and our defense was struggling. Every time we came back

to the huddle, players would be talking down at one another and behaving in a toxic way. As a

player I remember thinking, "I should say something. But I am not a captain, it is not my job." I

did not say anything. Our opponent scored a last-minute touchdown to win the game two plays

after my thought. I have often wondered what might have happened if I had used my

communication skills to refocus the team. This moment solidified in my mind the importance of leadership to the success of a team.

After university, I pursued an after degree in education. In this degree, coaching football was not at the forefront of my mind as I was in the Middle School stream. Football is only played at the high school level in Canada. Upon graduation, I was hired at Crocus Plains and jumped at the opportunity to coach the sport that was so influential in my development. I have served as a positional coach, coordinator, and head coach during my time coaching high school football. Leadership development to maximize the potential of the athletes and teams I coach has been a passion of mine. Balancing the diverse personalities and backgrounds of players and coaches to unite behind a common goal is always a challenge. My passion for leadership also led me to pursue a career in educational administration. For the last two years, I have worked as a Vice-Principal. These experiences contributed to my desire to research further into leadership practices and what data on sports leadership says are the elements of successful leadership.

NDSU Bison Background

As a coach, I attend a yearly clinic in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Some of the biggest draws at the clinic are presentations from the NDSU Bison coaching staff. When I started attending these clinics, the football program was not on my radar. At the 2014 clinic, I remember sitting in a presentation with my brother and another assistant coach, on NDSU's tackling system called "keep the cup". The passion from the coach, techniques taught, and film used to highlight the concept was the best presentation I had ever participated in at the clinic. This experience led to me further researching and following the NDSU football program and their unprecedented success. The sustained success of the program is unrivaled and inspired my desire to research how they sustained success at an elite level.

The Bison, located in Fargo, North Dakota, have a combined playoff record of 75-17 in 35 playoff appearances (North Dakota State Football, 2021).   At the FCS level, they have a 42-4 record in the playoffs through 2022 and have only lost one playoff game at home. All playoff games they have lost have been to the eventual national champion. Prior to joining the FCS level, they played at the Division II level and won five national championships between 1983 and 1990 (North Dakota State Football, 2021). They have also won three College Division national championships in the 1960's. This unprecedented success at three levels speaks to the strong leadership that this program has cultivated.

Another impressive aspect of the Bison football program is the number of athletes that have gone on to play in the National Football League (NFL). Through the history of the football program, over 50 athletes have gone on to be drafted or play in the NFL. From their run in the FCS over the last 12 years, 11 athletes have played or have been drafted to the NFL (Pro Football Reference, 2021).   Given the Bison compete at the FCS level, it is rare that the Bison will get the top recruits in the United States. The program puts a significant investment of time and infrastructure in developing these athletes to meet their potential. The number of players that move to the professional level shows this program develops athletes at an elite level.

The most recent championship run with the Bison is very impressive given changes in athletics leadership. During the 2010's, the Bison had a change in athletics director and had three coaches serve. Gene Taylor served as athletics director from 2001-2014 at NDSU before being hired as the athletics director at Kansas State University (Bison Illustrated, 2016). Taylor was replaced by Matt Larsen who has served as the athletics director since 2014. Taylor was responsible for hiring Craig Bohl, the coach who started the Bison dynasty. Bohl served as head coach from 2003-2013 winning three national championships. At the end of the 2013 season, he

was hired as head coach of the University of Wyoming Cowboys. Larsen hired both Chris

Klieman and Matt Entz. Klieman was head coach from 2014-2018 and won four National

Championships in five seasons. He was hired at the end of the 2018 season as head coach of the

Kansas State University Wildcats. Entz has served as head coach since 2019 and won a National

Championship in his first season. These changes in leadership make the sustained success of the

Bison very impressive.

Study Questions

Below are the research questions for this study:

1.   What unifiers and values have contributed to and defined the unprecedented success of

        the Bison dynasty? (Containers)

2.   How did these unifiers and values overcome the tremendous challenges of sustaining

        success at the FCS level? (Differences)

3.   What strategies were used to create the opportunity for interactions that develop shared

        values and unify diverse elements of the program towards a common goal? (Exchanges)

        To comprehend the success of the program, it was important to understand the values that

built the foundation for the program. What were unique about these elements and who

established them? How were these values communicated? These foundational values were

examined as Containers that differentiated the Bison football program from the surrounding

environment. Once foundational values were established it was important to understand how

these Containers allowed the program to overcome the challenge of changes in staff, sustained

success at recruiting, training new recruits to buy into the program, and continually playing

against the most challenging teams in the FCS. What was unique about these beliefs? How were

they implemented in a way that differentiated the Bison from their competition every season?

The purpose of Containers is to unite the team and create the opportunity to overcome the Differences in the program. When Containers and Differences interact successfully, it allows the team to adapt and sustain success. The interaction of these two elements is essential to the ability to sustain success.

There are three macro groups of leadership within a university program. The administration staff, coaching staff, and student athletes. Each group of leadership must function at a high level to ensure the success of the team. What contributions did each group make towards the success of the program? Each grouping is responsible for different aspects of the success of the program. How did the program ensure that each group remained focused on a common goal of winning the National Championship? It was important that we understand what contributions each group made to the success of the program. This allowed us to look at how the various groups contributed to the overall success of the program.

Finally, we needed to understand the strategies used to keep each group on the same page. How was information communicated between the various groups? In football, when communication is lacking, it is very easy for the success of the program to be derailed. When the team struggled, what strategies were used to get the team back on track? How were leaders used in this process? What expectations were placed on leaders vs. what expectations were placed on regular members of the program? Were leadership expectations placed upon all members of the team? In asking these questions, we learned the unique aspects of the program that allowed the various leadership groups to guide the program at a high level.

Literature Gaps

There have been many studies on leadership in college sports programs. While there will be commonalities between the data in this study and the data of previous studies on sports

leadership and success, I believe that this study provides the opportunity to fill gaps in the current literature. The past twelve years have been a special moment in time that needed to be studied. No other program in the history of the FCS has won as many championships as the Bison. The Bison were able to win their 9 championships over the course of a 12 years. This unprecedented success provides a unique moment in time to examine leadership and building a culture of success.

Much research has been conducted through the lens of Chelladurai's (1979, 1990) Leadership Scale for Sports. Williams (2010) examined the influence of coach leadership behavior through the lens of the LSS. This study raised questions on the potential for the LSS to completely paint the picture of what athletes' perceptions of coach leadership behavior are. Secondly, it raised the need for more qualitative research in the form of interviews and focus groups that investigate the influence specific coaching behaviors have on the developmental growth of athletes and overall success of the program (Williams, 2010). This study provides qualitative data on coaching leadership behaviors outside of the LSS.

The relationship between development and winning is an important area of study in sports leadership. Williams (2010) raised the need for further study on athlete development as an independent variable in comparison to other institutional variables. Is there a link between coaches who are providing athlete leadership development and said team being highly successful? How does this athlete development contribute to the success of the team as compared to elements such as graduation, retention of athletes, community involvement, and financial funding of the program (Williams, 2010)? This is an important gap in the literature that this study sought to fill.

The literature on student leadership has been clear that there are many opportunities for student athletes to lead within a team program (Schorr, 2007). There is a need for further research on how informal and formal leadership opportunities for student leadership influence the success of a program. For example, how would a leadership council influence a team in a different manner than traditional captains' roles (Schoor, 2010). The Bison have displayed the ability to have multiple members of the program provide leadership in a large team setting. The various forms of leadership in the Bison program, provided valuable insight into understanding how multiple leadership functions contribute to the success of the program.

Much research has been conducted into the effective coaching behaviors for both assistant and head coaches at the college level. Martinov (2003), examined coaching leadership behaviors and their effect on the success of the program. His study made it clear that there is a need for further examination of coaching leadership style and behaviors, their compatibility with the university and divisional philosophies, and the overall success of the program (Martinov, 2003). The Bison play in the most competitive and challenging division in the FCS. The Missouri Valley Football Conference (MVFC) regularly has 4 to 5 teams make the national playoffs. The Bison have been able to win National Championships with three different coaches in a twelve-year period. It is unique to note that the second two coaches were hired from within the program and both were promoted from the defensive coordinator role. This study provided data on how the Head Coach's philosophy meshed with the school philosophy to build a highly successful culture.

It is inevitable that programs will face the challenge of replacing a highly successful coach. There has been significant research of leadership succession in college sports. Dohrn, Lopez, and Reinhardt (2015), examined circumstances when leadership succession will have a

positive influence, no influence, or negative influence. This study highlighted the need for further research on the outcome differences of hiring coaches from outside the program or assistant coaches inside of the program (Dohrn, Lopez, & Reinhardt, 2015). The Bison built their dynasty by hiring head coaches with previous experience within the program. This study provided insight into the benefits of hiring from within the program.

Limitations

This study was conducted by a Canadian researcher on an American institution. While the two countries do share many cultural values, there are significant differences in cultural values in the sporting world. It is possible that some information may be lost in translation or overlooked due to a difference in cultural values. Another limitation of this study is the openness of the participants in both the interview and focus group portion. This case study relied on the willingness of participants to share personal details of the program. Staff, students, and coaches may not have included information that they do not want released to competition within their conference in the NCAA.

Past student athletes, who served as leaders in the program, were not studied. This limited the study's perspective to athletes, currently in the program, available and willing to interview. This study was limited to one football program within the MVFC of the FCS. Each division and conference in the NCAA has unique characteristics. Unique traits, of the MVFC, may limit the transferability of the findings of this study. To this author's knowledge, this is the first case study of the program that targets their unprecedented success at the FCS level over the past twelve seasons. Further studies may provide additional insights that contributed to the success of the program.

Delimitations

This study was a case study of the NDSU Bison football program. The unprecedented success of the Bison at the FCS level provided a special moment in time to document in a case study. The focus of this study was on the values, beliefs, and structures that contributed to this success and the contributions that athletic administration staff, coaching staff, and players made to building this culture. The data did not include all players but focused on a veteran student leader and a new student leader to allow the author time to thoroughly engage with these leaders in the program. The coaching staff interviews and focus groups included the head coach, a veteran assistant coach that has worked with multiple head coaches, and an assistant coach who is new to the program. This was to provide a broad range of perspectives to the program's success. The other interview was limited to the Athletics Director to focus on hiring practices and overarching practices that have influenced the values of the Bison. Focusing on these groups for the interview process allowed me to hone in on key factors that helped build the success of the program from the perspectives of influential individuals.

The study was limited to student athletes, coaches, and an athletic administrator from a single football program in the MVFC of the FCS. The results of this study may not be generalizable across all states or countries, conferences, divisions, or teams. Due to time and access constraints, this study focused on key student leaders, coaches, and the Athletic Director when doing interviews and focus groups. The perspectives of other staff members, past team members, and student athletes in the program were not included in the interview process. Through limiting the interview process, valuable details that have contributed to the success of the Bison football program may have been excluded.

Definitions

For the consistency in the interpretation of this study, the following terms are defined:

Specialized Vocabulary

NCAA – The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) is a member led organization dedicated to the wellbeing and success of college athletics. It involves educational institutions from the United States and one-member school from Canada. Their main job is to interpret and support member legislation, run all championships, and manage programs that benefit student-athletes (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2021).

Division I – NCAA Division I schools have the largest student bodies, manage the largest athletics budgets, and offer the most generous scholarships. There are 350 schools, over 6000 teams, and over 170,000 athletes participating in NCAA Division I athletics (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2021).

Football Championship Subdivision – Is a subdivision of Division I football in the NCAA. Schools in this subdivision compete in a championship playoff at the end of the season (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2021).

Football Bowl Subdivision – Is a subdivision of Division I football in the NCAA. Schools in this subdivision complete in a bowl series at the end of the season. These programs have the largest budgets and most generous scholarships (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2021).

Missouri Valley Football Conference – Founded in 1985, the MVFC is the premier football conference in the FCS subdivision. Eleven teams compete in the MVFC as of the 2020 football

season. It is one of two conferences that guarantee the conference winner an automatic bid to the

FCS playoffs (Missouri Valley Football Conference, 2021).

Operational Vocabulary

Container - Can be looked at as the unifying force that holds the system together and unites

participants. Containers can be external boundaries, central attracting forces, or one-to-one

attracting forces (Martin, 2014). Systems that self-organize must be differentiated from the

surrounding environment. The boundary that marks this differentiation serves as the Container

(Martin, 2014).

Difference - A distinction that creates a potential for movement or change (Eoyang, 2001).

Differences are essential for self-organizing to occur. Eoyang and Holladay (2013) explain,

"Differences that make a difference determine the speed and path and outcome of self-organizing

processes. If there are too many Differences, the system can't settle down. If there are not

enough Differences, change can't get started". Differences interact with Containers to form

Transforming Exchanges.

Transforming Exchanges (Exchanges) - A transfer of information, energy, or material between

members that binds the parts of an organization together into a whole. Transforming Exchanges

can involve communication, transactions, non-verbal actions, and many other forms. The

interaction and of Containers (C) and Differences (D) are necessary for Transforming Exchanges

to develop self-organizing processes (Eoyang, 2001).

Student Athlete - Student athletes are men and women who are enrolled in a college or university

and who participate in intercollegiate sports at Division I, II, or III levels. For this study, this

term is limited to Division I male athletes participating in the Bison football program. (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2021).

Student Leader – A member of the Bison football program appointed or elected to a leadership position within the program.

Summary

This thesis is presented in five chapters. The first chapter includes an introduction, the purpose of the study, the importance of the study, the background of the author, the background of the program studied, study questions, literature gaps, limitations, delimitations, and key terms defined. Chapter Two reviews the literature on coaching leadership, student athlete leadership, and Complexity Theory. It will also include the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter Three presents the research methodology for this study. Presented in this chapter will be the research design, selection of participants, data collection, and data analysis.   In the fourth chapter, the data of this study is discussed. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the conclusions and implications of this case study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Leadership in college sports is a widely studied topic with a strong body of research developed from the 1970's and onward (Williams, 2010). Over 1100 schools participate in the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) and in 2019 these schools spent $18.8 billion on their athletics programs (NCAA, 2020). Of this amount, $3.7 billion was spent on coaching salaries and $3.6 billion was spent on student aid (NCAA, 2020). This large financial investment has led to increased demands on programs to produce winning teams. Literature on leadership, organizational change, and sustained success is vitally important to organizations, leaders, and coaches as they strive to build successful programs.

This chapter will present and extensive overview and analysis of literature on sports leadership, organizational change, and development of a winning culture. This case study focused on a NCAA Football Championship Subdivision School (FCS) and the literature will be analyzed with specific focus to this context. The literature on Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) and its application to college football will be presented. Second, research on coach leadership and its role in the development of a winning culture will be reviewed. The third area of focus will review literature of player and peer leadership in an athletics program. Literature on the leadership of athletics directors and their influence in the success a program will be discussed. Finally, an outline of the theoretical framework that underpinned this study will be provided.

Administrative Leadership

Athletics Directors (AD) play a prominent role in the development of an athletics department's culture. Developing a shared understanding of the present and preferred culture within an athletics department is a key responsibility of the AD (Van den Steen, 2003; Schein, 2004). A shared understanding of the current dynamics within the department and a clear vision of where the department is headed are key to managing change and sustaining a successful culture. Athletics Directors that fail to develop a shared understanding and vision for their department often see cultures that stifle the ability to change and stunt the ability of programs to attain goals (Heil, 2018). This is a significant responsibility that requires careful management of resources, balancing the demands of stakeholders, and the ability to make prudent decisions in the face of external pressure. Focus will be placed on stakeholders that influence athletics directors, management of financial resources, and external pressures AD's face in building a winning and positive culture within the athletics department.

Stakeholders

The most significant influence on athletics directors is often the President of the university. Athletics departments, that seek to be successful in building a positive culture, face tremendous pressure to align their vision with the President's vision for the school (Christian, 2017). The President sets the direction for the university and has tremendous influence with many stakeholders. Presidents approve initiatives and ignite momentum behind these movements. According to a study by Christian (2017), participants consistently noted that, "If your president is not on board, you are screwed" (p. 84).   Presidents push athletics leadership to grow and provide support for the development of their department. Successful athletics departments align their values with the President and leverage the relationship to support initiatives that build a successful culture.

The senior leadership team within an athletics department is an essential component in creating a common vision and aligning the department toward said vision. Senior staff within the athletics department challenge and support the AD in the establishment of values that build success (Christian, 2017). Building a relationship that encourages a collaborative culture with open dialogue is an essential component of successful athletics leadership. These relationships build cultural congruence and support the department's ability to perform at their highest level of effectiveness (Heil, 2018). A culture of constructive criticism amongst senior staff allows the department to effectively face challenges as they arise. There are many demands upon athletics departments and AD's must have trust in their senior staff to carry out the vision for the department. It is challenging to oversee every aspect of the department and small everyday decisions must be trusted to senior staff (Heil, 2018).

Coaches shape the success and failure of sports teams daily. Coaches face a tremendous amount of pressure to win, which results in coaches exerting pressure on AD's to create a culture of growth that prioritizes success within athletics (Christian, 2017). Successful AD's strive to hire coaches that promote a culture of excellence and influence the priorities of athletics in a positive direction. Coaches provide a direct link from the student athletes to the AD (Christian, 2017). The student athlete experience is a high priority for all AD's and they rely on coaches to provide insight so that student athletes will have a positive experience. Building a familial culture amongst coaches and administrative staff supports the department in its goals (Heil, 2018).

Finally, student athletes have a tremendous voice and influence within athletics departments. Building consensus among athletes is essential to the organization adapting to change and maintaining success (Christian, 2017). Involving student athletes in the selection of coaches, determining departmental priorities and how money is spent within the department creates a strong sense of belonging (Christian, 2017). Building an athlete centered culture is a key element of an adaptable and nimble culture (Heil, 2018). Given the tremendous dynamics of change in Division I football, it is important that athletes and programs are flexible. This flexibility is essential to sustaining success.

Financial Resources

Financial resources are a defining force in determining the ability of an organization to build a successful culture that can adapt to change. Sources of revenue include: institutional funding, donations, TV revenue, conference revenue sharing, ticket sales, and sponsorships (Christian, 2017). Funding determines the feasibility of agendas within the athletics department. Without sufficient funding, AD's are unable to hire the best coaches, build necessary facilities,

and provide resources that support the student athlete experience (Christian, 2017). Money is inseparably linked with departmental decisions.

The influence of money and commercialization of college football is a significant challenge in running an athletics department. Many AD's cite that television contracts, sponsorships, and corporate partnerships are a necessary evil in current college athletics (Christian, 2017). These partnerships have eroded AD influence and can be viewed as detrimental to the welfare of student athletes at times. AD's view financial partnerships as a necessity because they provide revenue to build the best facilities which attract top athletes. These partnerships shift decision making in certain areas to entities outside the control of the university. This includes the timing of games, equipment athletes are required to wear, and decisions regarding facilities (Christian, 2017).

A significant challenge that has arisen from financial partnerships is the rise of priority sports. Many schools now prioritize basketball and football because these programs are viewed as the largest revenue generators. Winning basketball and football programs provide revenue that benefits the university and creates a level of prestige that leads to increased revenue (Christian, 2017). This also creates disparities between athletic programs within a university as preferential funding is given to priority sports to fund higher salaries for coaching staffs and more money for infrastructure.

External Forces

There are many external forces that influence the leadership of athletics programs. One of the prominent influences is conference affiliation. Conferences set standards which the university must uphold and provide peer institutions that become benchmarks to measure an athletics department's success, quality, and priorities (Christian, 2017). Binding a department to

a conference requires the relinquishing of certain decision-making power in exchange for the benefits of a common goal and collective vision within a conference. Conference partnerships create opportunities for sharing ideas, creating new revenue streams, and increased local and national profiles (Christian, 2017).

A second prominent external force is NCAA legislation and policy. Legislation and policy from the NCAA have a significant influence on the decision making of an AD. The NCAA determines the rules on scholarships, recruiting, and standards for student athletes. These policies are not static and change, so it is important for AD's to be current on legislation governing their behavior (Christian, 2017).   Athletics departments that are not in compliance with NCAA policy can face significant sanctions for failing to adhere to the legislation. One such challenge cited by AD's was the financial strain placed on departments due to legislation that prioritized larger programs (Christian, 2017). An interview with the Athletics Director was used in this thesis to determine the influence of senior administration on the success of the NDSU Bison.

Coach Leadership

Finding the right coach to provide leadership within college football is viewed as an integral precursor to building a successful program. The right coach can positively influence a program's ability to recruit top prospects and serve as a boon in a generating revenue and financial contributions to a program (Adler et al., 2012; Martinov 2004). Head coaches play a disproportionate role in building a football culture that creates satisfied and successful athletes (Reinke, 2002; Sorenson, 2018; Williams, 2010). A coach's leadership style will greatly influence the development, contentment, and success of athletes within the program. Given the high stakes nature of FCS college football, finding a coach who can provide effective leadership

is an essential component of success.   Much of the research on coaching leadership has focused on the effect of changes in coach leadership on a program's success, coaching traits that contribute to a successful program, and building shared leadership within a program. The Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership (MMSL) is one of the main tools used in researching coach leadership and efficacy. This section will provide an overview of the MMSL and review the literature on coach leadership with a focus on changes in coach leadership, predictors of satisfaction with sport leadership, and shared leadership.

Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership and Leadership Scale for Sports

The MMSL developed by Chelladurai (1979, 1990) has been created specifically for research in sport leadership. In this model, leadership is viewed as an interactional process (Sorenson, 2018). Chelladurai (1979, 1990) explains that the effectiveness of leadership in sport hinges on situational characteristics found in both leaders and group members. Therefore, the efficacy of leadership will vary based on the characteristics of those interacting and the constraints of the situation (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). The MMSL has five dimensions of leadership: Training Behavior (TB), Democratic Behavior (DB), Autocratic Behavior (AB), Social Support (SS), and Rewarding Behavior (RB) (Chelladurai, 1979). The dimension of Training Behaviour (TB) is focused on leadership behaviors that seek to improve the performance of the athletes. The extent that leadership allows players to be involved in decision making is the Democratic Behaviour (DB) dimension. This could involve setting group goals, strategies, practice methods, and game tactics. Autocratic Behavior (AB) is the dimension that indicates the extent to which the leader separates himself from the team. The degree to which the leader shows care for the welfare of athletes, a positive atmosphere, and strong interpersonal relationships is the Social Support (SS) dimension. Finally, the Rewarding Behaviour (RB)

dimension looks at behaviors that provide reinforcement by recognizing good behavior and performance.

These five dimensions form the basis for the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) developed by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980). The LSS, based on the MMSL, has been utilized by many researchers in the study of sport leadership. The LSS is made up of forty questions and divided into five subscales based upon the five dimensions of the MMSL (Van Gastel, 2010). Thirteen items on the LSS relate to TB, nine items to DB, five items to AB, eight items to SS, and five items to RB. In this scale, optimal performance occurs when there is congruence among actual, preferred, and required leadership behaviour (Williams, 2010).

Changes in Coach Leadership

Football is a well-established sport with a wide body of research focused on effective coach leadership. Throughout this research, it has been well documented that there are high expectations on Division 1 football coaches and the traits that span successful coaches at this level (Martinov, 2004). Success at this level often comes with significant financial benefits that aid athletics, academics, and facilities on a campus. This builds pressure and encourages universities to hire coaches that can succeed at a high level. It is not uncommon for universities to fire coaches that do not meet performance expectations. This phenomenon has led to a body of research which studies the effects of changes in coach leadership upon the success of a program. The data on changes in coach leadership will be discussed below with a focus on what research says is the best way to build a successful program.

Hiring the right coach opens a program to the ability to positively affect recruitment and financial giving (Adler et al., 2012). High performance expectations are placed on coaches at the FCS and FBS level from athletes, assistant coaches, fans, and administrators. This is consistent

across all levels of football, not just the FCS and FBS level (Martinov, 2004). Data, obtained from research in this area, shows consistent correlations between coaching succession and the performance of a football program. One of the first criteria for a coaching succession to be successful is the condition of the program at the time of the change. Programs with a poor performance record to a mid-performance record are shown to see a decrease in performance both in the short-term and long-term (Adler et al., 2012; Dronyk-Trosper & Stitzel, 2017). For a coaching change to be successful, three factors will influence the success of the transition: financial resources, previous performance, and the reason for the transition in coaching. Programs with strong financial resources tend to see little change in performance when they fire the coach (Adler et al., 2012). Programs with strong financial resources that replace or poach a coach from another program can see improved results and sustained success (Adler et al., 2012; Dronyk-Trosper & Stitzel, 2017). If the program has a history of success, strong financial resources, and can recruit the right coach it will contribute to sustained success within the program. Given the significant cost of changing coaches and the challenge of finding a quality replacement, the data suggests that replacing a coach is not a recipe for success in most cases.

Current research points to the foundations and structures a program uses to develop athletes as being the greatest contributors to building a successful program. Programs that build systems to effectively develop their athletes see the greatest success and growth in their program (Dronyk-Trosper & Stitzel, 2004). This is particularly true at the FCS level, where it is rare for a program to land elite prospects and recruits. The data suggests that a program interested in building a strong culture should invest in developing their members as students, athletes, and individuals. Programs that focus on nurturing and building their student athletes over their time in the program, see better results than those that focus on changing coaches.

Satisfaction with Sport Leadership

The satisfaction of student athletes with coach and sport leadership is well researched. The MMSL has been heavily used, since it was developed, to determine which leadership traits in coaches led to satisfaction among student athletes. The data in this area shows some common themes across all levels of college football and some divergences between Division I and lower levels of college football. This section will focus on the traits of sport leadership that lead to player satisfaction across divisions, the traits that differentiate Division 1 from lower divisions, and the optimal developmental environment at the FCS level of football.

The application of the MMSL has led to a significant body of research that the TB and RB traits are highly correlated with athlete satisfaction across divisions in college football (Reinke, 2002; Sorenson, 2018; Williams, 2010). Reinke (2002) found that a coach's knowledge of sport skills, plays, and drills supplemented with the ability to make adjustments in strategy and coaching behavior leads to high player satisfaction. Coaches that score high in these traits are able to provide feedback and adjust their coaching to ensure the optimal development of their athletes. The growth in the athletes, in turn, contributes to said athletes' feelings of satisfaction. Athletes find great satisfaction in structured sport settings that provide opportunities to develop skills and receive specific feedback on various aspects of their game (Williams, 2010). Coach design heavy in training and instruction combined with positive feedback and reinforcement leads to increased growth in athletes.

One area that differentiates lower divisions of college football from Division 1 programs is in regard to Social Support (SS) and Democratic Behavior (DB) versus Autocratic Behavior (AB). Athletes from lower division programs prefer high levels of social support from the coach and the opportunity to provide input into the program (Reinke, 2002). Across small college

football programs, the evidence clearly shows athletes at this level are less satisfied with autocratic coaching behaviors and more satisfied with democratic coaching behaviors that allow for input (Reinke, 2002). Division I athletes at the FCS and FBS level are shown to have high levels of satisfaction with more autocratic coaching behaviors (Reinke, 2002; Sorenson, 2018; Williams, 2010). One significant contributor to this influence is the number of scholarship athletes at the Division I level. Division III athletes often have no scholarship and are paying to play the game. Most Division I athletes are on scholarship, playing in higher stakes games, and are more likely to be signed or drafted to a professional football league. There is a much bigger emphasis on winning at higher levels that may make players more open to autocratic coaching behaviors (Sorenson, 2018; Williams; 2010).

Data has shown that growth is the most significant in the first two years of college (Williams, 2010). While growth may not occur as rapidly in the latter two years of an athlete's career, growth still occurs in these years. Structured environments that provide clear expectations, mandate attendance at meetings and practice, and provide structured training and instruction will see strong growth in their athletes (Williams, 2010). This growth will carry over to a student's academic achievement. At the FCS level, coaches should focus on developing supports that are structured and focused on the continual growth of student athletes (Reinke, 2004). In this area, athletes are shown to prefer autocratic behaviors.

Shared Leadership

Football programs have many moving parts and require leadership in many areas. It is in the best interest of a head coach to develop a shared leadership style within their program. Willenbrock (2009) found that a shared leadership approach leads to a wider dispersion of leadership, greater emergence of leadership among assistant coaches and athletes, greater

maturity in athletes, and provides a model of sustainable leadership. Shared leadership can lead to greater team unity and responsibility (Willenbrock, 2009). Programs that leverage these benefits can place greater leadership roles on members within the program, freeing coaches to focus on developing athletes. A drawback to this approach is that programs can struggle to find a clear leadership voice if a common vision is not developed and nurtured within the program. An interview with the Head Coach was conducted to discern the leadership practices that contributed to the success of the program.

Athlete and Peer Leadership

Athlete and peer leadership plays a significant role in the success of an athletic program. These leaders contribute to the cohesion of the team through modeling appropriate behavior, act as buffers between administration/coaches and the team, represent the team at external functions, and serve as problems solvers within the team (Coffey, 2018; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Crenshaw, 2007). Their efforts contribute greatly to building a successful culture that achieves goals and succeeds at a high level. Much of the research to date has focused on formal leadership roles, such as captains, within athletics programs (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen et al., 2014). Recently, focus has been placed on studying the importance of both formal and informal leadership roles within athletics programs. This section will focus on the classification of student athlete leaders, common traits of athlete leaders, the expectations and selection of leaders, and formal versus informal leadership.

Classification of Peer Leaders

When discussing the classification of student leaders and the characteristics that define these classifications, there is much agreement in the literature. Crenshaw (2007) studied the athletics' programs at a large public university in a mid-major conference in the southern United States. Through this research, athlete leaders were classified into four groups: Athlete, Communicator, Friend, Role Model (Crenshaw, 2007). Each classification of leader, described in Table 1 below, plays an important role in building positive team culture.

Table 1

Classification of Student Leaders

Classification	Traits
Athlete	These leaders are the best players on the team. They display a desire to win, love of the sport, dedication, strong work ethic, and know the game as they are experienced. They are willing to take risks due to their experience which causes them to stand out. These individuals are expected to be leaders because of their ability. A downfall of this leader is that they may not always model the best behavior to their peers.
Communicator	The communicator is a compilation of various roles within an athletics program. The common defining feature of these leaders is that they are vocal and motivating. They serve as a bridge between the coach and the team and are willing to say what needs to be said. They do not try to make everyone happy, but rather they say what teammates need to hear to improve. Often, athletes in this category address the team as a whole. These leaders contribute strongly to unity and cohesion within the team. It is important that these leaders display a positive attitude.
Friend	The friend is an approachable problem solver who cares about team dynamics. They are trustworthy, serve as a support system, and desire to help others. This leader tends to solve problems between small groups or 1-2 players within a program. They focus on the small detailed dynamics of the team.

Role Model	The role model leads by example. They tend not to be the best athlete in the program, but a generally successful individual. The integrity and responsibility of the team is very influenced by these individuals. Traits displayed by these leaders include good grades, responsibility, timeliness, moral and ethical decision making, and hard work. These leaders, if properly developed, strongly influence the success of the program.

Fransen et al. (2014), examined the literature on athlete leadership and discussed extending the classification of leadership roles for student athletes. Traditionally, athletes had been classified by the function they serve within the program. Bales (1950), classified leaders as serving in an instrumental function or in an expressive function. Athletes who serve in an instrumental function focus on the accomplishment of group tasks, while those who serve in an expressive function focus on interpersonal relationships. These functions are not mutually exclusive, athletes can engage in both task and interpersonal functions within the team. Lougheed et al. (2006), added a third and more recent classification, an external function. This leader serves as a representative for the team in meetings and media gatherings. A fourth category, that deals with motivating and encouraging athletes on-field, was established based upon feedback from administrators, coaches, and athletes (Fransen et al., 2014). A leader that offers support and encouragement to teammates contributes to the involvement and engagement of all team members. The absence of this role can cause a collective collapse of a team.

Leaders often wear multiple hats and do not provide one type of leadership. The literature shows that most leaders occupy multiple roles within a team (Fransen et al., 2014). There is tremendous crossover between the classifications of leaders created by Crenshaw (2007)

and the classifications discussed in Fransen et al. (2014). This speaks to the fact that leaders often serve multiple leadership functions within a program.

Common Traits

Across the literature, there are common traits that are displayed by individuals in leadership positions. One of those traits is respect from peers, coaches, and administration (Coffey, 2018; Crenshaw; 2007; Schorr, 2007). Leaders, through action and consistency, command the respect of their teammates regardless of if they are in a formal or informal leadership role. Another common trait shared by leaders, regardless of classification, is that they lead by example (Coffey, 2018; Crenshaw, 2007; Fransen, 2014; Schorr, 2007). They model ethical decision making, work hard, strive to achieve academically, and are consistent in their behavior. Leaders tend to be success and result driven and take initiative to move the team towards a common purpose (Coffey, 2018; Crenshaw, 2007; Fransen, 2014; Fuller et al., 2017; Schorr, 2007). Leaders are optimistic in the face of negativity and can maintain a positive attitude, despite challenges from inside or outside of the program (Fuller et al., 2017). Finally, leaders have a strong sense of self that allows them to reflect on their performance and better handle the challenges and adversity of leadership. These traits are shown to develop teams that better handle adversity, are confident, have high team cohesion, high standards, and high satisfaction (Fransen et al., 2014). While there are different functions leaders serve, it is important to note that the literature says that there are common traits that define those in peer leadership positions.

Expectations and Selection of Leaders

In the high stakes world of NCAA Division 1 Athletics, results are important and leadership from student athletes is essential for the success of a program. This comes with high

expectations of student leaders, from teammates, coaches, and administration within a program. It is important to define the expectations that each of these groups has on student athletes in leadership positions. Each group will have differing expectations for these leaders in hopes of creating a successful team culture. This section will examine the expectations from each of these groups on leaders and factors to consider when selecting leaders.

Teammates have very high expectations of student leaders within programs and often look to these leaders to have all the answers (Coffey, 2018; Crenshaw, 2007; Fuller et al., 2017; Schorr, 2007). This can be a heavy responsibility, as few leaders have all the answers. Leaders need to be careful to not try and have all the answers, but instead display confidence and composure in the face of challenges (Crenshaw, 2007). Teammates respond to their leaders' behaviors. As a result, confidence and composure have become expectations of leaders. Currently, student leaders have significant power and are expected to exercise this power in the best interest of the team. Student leaders have organized to implement change on employment during the school year and have advocated and fought to benefit from their likeness being used in promotions (Crenshaw, 2007). Consistency is an important expectation that teammates have for leaders. They do not want the leader to change their habits and behaviors that led to them becoming a leader. In a sense, they want accountability from the leader and want to see continuity in the caring and love for the best interests of the team. Finally, teammates expect leaders to teach younger members of the team to lead via modelling and mentoring.

Coaches have unique expectations for student leaders when compared to the expectations of teammates. A primary expectation of coaches is that leaders hold the team accountable to what leadership decides the team needs to be doing (Crenshaw, 2007). Teammates expect leaders to advocate on their behalf to make things easier, while coaches expect leaders to hold

teammates accountable. This has come with the expectation that captains act like assistant

coaches and play a role in the discipline of the team. These expectations can frustrate the leader,

as it is difficult to balance the expectations of teammates and coaches (Coffey, 2018; Crenshaw,

2007). This can be a very effective strategy if the coach is willing to relinquish some of their

power and influence of the team and adopt a shared leadership approach. This can also serve as

a unifying factor that creates a strong team concept instead of a separation between coaches and

players. Finally, coaches expect leaders to serve as a bridge between the coach and the players.

Administration often views leaders as representatives of the whole school. As such,

administration often views student leaders as prime candidates to represent student athletes on

committees within the university and attend external functions on behalf of the program

(Crenshaw, 2007). A high level of responsibility within the university is an expectation from

administration. If there are issues with student athletes, leaders are leaned upon to bring these

issues and solutions to administration and represent the athletes. Often, they are the first contact

between administration and the team. Finally, they are expected to help the team work to their

potential academically, personally, and athletically.

Given the complexity of leadership roles within the NCAA, it is important that programs

give thought to the selection of student leaders. The literature says that student athletes often fill

multiple leadership roles and are required to balance high expectations of teammates, coaches,

and administration. It is important that leaders are selected for roles that best suit their strengths.

Care should be given to place leaders in roles in which they can succeed and meet expectations

(Fransen et al., 2014). The literature suggests that it is important for coaches, administration, and

teammates to co-create the criteria and expectations of leaders prior to selecting leaders (Coffey,

2018; Crenshaw, 2007; Fuller et al., 2017). By establishing clear expectations for leaders,

stakeholders can better select individuals to fulfill those roles. Finally, teams need to invest in leadership development to ensure that younger players are developed as leaders upon entry into the program (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen et al., 2014).

Formal versus Informal Leadership

A common theme from the literature explores the nature of formal and informal leadership roles. Formal leaders, often a captain, have a prescribed role within the program. Informal leaders become leaders by gaining respect from their teammates through interactions (Fransen et al., 2014). Schorr (2007), found that players will follow leaders regardless of if they are in a formal or informal role; however, younger players tend to follow formal leaders and captains more than informal leaders. Captains are often viewed as the best leaders on the field, but not necessarily the best leader on the team (Fransen et al., 2014). This hints that captains are often strong task leaders and motivational leaders. Given the complexity of large sports programs, it is important for leadership to be spread throughout the program (Coffey, 2018; Crenshaw, 2007; Fransen et al., 2014; Fuller et al., 2017). Informal leaders play a vital role in filling important leadership roles within athletics programs. Informal leaders, when encouraged, serve as great role models within the program that contribute greatly to the success of a team. Teams that work to distribute and share leadership between formal and informal roles see improved ability to handle adversity and the development of high standards of behavior (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). It is very clear from the literature that further study needs to be conducted on the relationship between formal and informal leadership roles. In this thesis, views on student leadership were investigated through a focus group conducted with two students at varying experience levels in the NDSU football program.

Complexity Leadership Theory

Leadership is a behavioral process that leads individuals and set groups to goals (Barrow, 1977).   Setting and working to goals is an essential component of competitive team athletics. In the FCS, the goal for many teams is to win enough games to compete for the FCS championship in a twenty-four-team tournament. No team in the history of college football has been as successful in this pursuit as the North Dakota State (NDSU) Bison football team (NCAA, 2020). Over the last twelve years, they have won nine National Championships, with a record of forty-two wins and four losses (NCAA, 2020). What makes this run so incredible is that it has been achieved in an environment of consistent change. During this championship run, the NDSU Bison have been led by three coaches and five quarterbacks. This unprecedented success, in a complex and changing environment, provided a compelling case to study through the lens of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT).

Complexity can be characterized by high levels of ambiguity, uncertainty, and interdependence (Backlander, 2018). Complexity causes the traditional relationship of cause and effect to be more obscure and potentially change rapidly (Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002). This means that traditional control of leadership may be less possible and useful. Understanding how organizations and teams can boost collective efficacy and improve adaptive capacity to create positive outcomes is an essential area of research. Many studies have called for more research on CLT and how to generate innovative and successful outcomes in the face of significant and consistent change (Backlander, 2018; Tourish, 2019; Martin, 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). College football teams experience tremendous complexity through the nature of the game, the recruiting process, changes to personnel (coaches and players), and the physical nature of the

game (injuries). Teams that have been successful in navigating these issues provide valuable

insight into navigating complex adaptive environments to build sustained success.

Agile Coaches

Backlander (2018), studied how agile coaches, working for Spotify, practiced enabling

leadership to create positive leadership outcomes within the company.   Through this study, six

enabling leadership practices emerged that led to positive outcomes in a complex environment.

The six practices include: increasing sensitivity to context, boosting and supporting other leaders,

establish and remind people of simple principles, observe the team and pay attention to

dynamics, make the unseen more visible and tangible, and enabling and encouraging

constructive dialogue (Backlander, 2018). These enabling leadership practices are summarized

in Table 2.   Complexity Leadership Theory involves the acknowledgment that organizational

outcomes emerge from interactions. Backlander (2018), suggests that fostering opportunity for

constructive dialogue and participant attention to the quality of interactions are essential

considerations for leadership practice.

Table 2

Six Enabling Leadership Practices

Practice	Description/Example
A. Increase sensitivity to context	Affecting the sensitivity of team members to cues within their environment. (Ex. Considering the consequences of one's actions to the team, their impact on others, and that others may not know what you know.)

B.	Boost and support other leaders	Working with organization members on how to lead, conducting difficult conversations, and how to interact in a transparent way. (Ex. Coaching those with conflict on how to positively engage in conflict resolution.)
C.	Establish and remind people of simple principles	Developing core values that guide team actions and promoting and focusing on said values. These values serve as a tool to help members prioritize and act wisely. (Ex. Focus on why we do the things we do and what we can control.)
D.	Observe the team and pay attention to dynamics	Pay attention to how the team is working as a team and how this compares to the image of what good teams do. (Ex. Mood of team; Helping behaviours; Smiling; Talking; Being civil towards each other; What is not said; Team members mentally present.)
E.	Make the unseen more visible and tangible	This involves questioning and mirroring what is seen. Leaders or coaches observing a behavior and then telling the team or individuals. (Ex. "I see this ….. Is this what you see?")
F.	Enable and encourage constructive dialogue	Developing opportunities and strategies that allow for open and constructive dialogue. (Ex. Tossing" an open question; Live directing (calling on people); Acting as a surrogate (asking "stupid questions"); 1-on-1 coaching to instill civil and constructive ways of interacting. These strategies should allow that no one should dominate and everyone should contribute.)

Container – Difference - Exchange

The CDE model of complexity leadership explains the speed, path, and direction of complex systems. The six enabling leadership practices are a tool to promote exchanges within a system or team that move it in a positive direction. Eoyang (2002) found that interventions or practices that change conditions within a complex environment change the coherence of the system. If these changes increase the coherence of the organization, they will also increase the

effectiveness of the organization (Eoyang, 2002).   Eoyong (2002) studied the CDE model across a variety of organizations including: concept, team, institutional, and community organizations. A common theme that emerged from this study is that strong Containers that bind the organization together are necessary to create coherence within the system (Eoyang, 2002).   The CDE model is designed to assess the needs of an organization and create interventions to improve or maintain the success of an organization. Organizations that understand their needs are better able to design interventions to the system that will increase coherence and move the organization to success (Eoyang, 2002).   When the three variables (Container, Differences, Exchanges) are used to create conditions that increase coherence, the CDE model provides a flexible, simple, and integrated approach to improve organizational development (Eoyang, 2002). The CDE model was used as a foundation to code and analyze the data from Focus Groups and Interviews in this thesis.

Self-Managed Teams

Building a sustainable culture is a necessary component of maintaining a successful organization. Martin (2019) studied organizations that implemented self-managed teams (SMT) to create a sustainable culture. Self-managed teams are defined as groups within an organization that work independently within the structure without external oversight (Martin, 2019). Positional groups within football operate in a very similar manner to SMT's in that they are required to operate independently within the team structure to contribute to the overall success of the program. Martin (2019) found eleven characteristics that lead to successful SMTs. These traits can be grouped into six internal traits and five external traits. Internal traits are specific to the SMT (positional group) and external traits are management decisions (coach/athletic director) that led to successful outcomes in SMT's (Martin, 2019).

Internal Traits

The internal traits that led to successful outcomes in SMT's include trust, leadership emergence, knowledge sharing, team organization, empowerment, and team goals. Trust is professional reliance on each member of the team and was a necessary precursor to improving knowledge sharing and promoting leadership emergence among members (Martin, 2019). Leadership emergence is the process of a member taking an internal role as team leader. This leadership role was unique in that it arises from within the team in order to improve team effectiveness (Martin, 2019). Emergent leadership encourages emotional stability and was a significant contributor to long-term sustainable success (Martin, 2019). Knowledge sharing is the process of team members sharing information and knowledge to improve the success of the group. Knowledge sharing within a competitive environment is essential to win and improve performance. Teams that have trust and promote knowledge sharing can effectively bridge different knowledge levels to improve the performance of the whole team (Martin, 2019). Stable team environments are a necessary component to improve knowledge sharing. The stage setting elements that define the behaviors and interactions within a team are defined as team organization. Martin (2019) found that an important component of successful SMT's was choice among team members. Successful teams had members whose values aligned with those of the overall organization. Empowerment is the level of control team members have over everyday tasks. This characteristic is strongly connected with satisfaction within an organization (Martin, 2019). Finally, team goals are measures that lead to accomplishing objectives (Martin, 2019). When teams have clear goals, they work more efficiently and effectively and do not get distracted from their purpose.

External Characteristics

External Characteristics that define successful SMT's include trust, leadership support, knowledge sharing, organizational strategy, and empowerment. Trust, in the external sense, is leaders listening to their subordinates and involving them in organizational processes. Leaders that promote trust gain better insights into the work of SMT's and experience decreased conflict (Martin, 2019). Leadership support involves leaders external to the SMT supporting the group in reaching their goals. This characteristic is essential to the team having required resources to complete goals (Martin, 2019). Knowledge sharing involves accumulating knowledge and sharing it through the organization, not just the SMT. Martin (2019) found a correlation between knowledge sharing among SMT's in an organization and growth. The ability to achieve superordinate goals is defined as organizational strategy. It is important that leaders create stable environments to achieve overarching organizational goals. Organizations that create shared responsibility among SMT's experienced greater success (Martin, 2019). Finally, empowerment involves leaders delegating tasks to individuals within the organization. Martin (2019) found that members of teams who are empowered have better performance and leaders that encouraged and supported team members in improving their skill sets found significant success.

Strategic Change

Houchin and Maclean (2005) examined organizations that exist within a complex adaptive environment. The purpose of the study was to determine how organizations can strategically adapt to change. There were two key findings from the study: 1) information sharing and interactions greatly influence the process of adapting to change and 2) collaboration and cooperation are essential to organizational success. Sharing information is a necessary component of building trust (Houchin & MacLean, 2005). Leaders can encourage information

sharing by promoting two-way interactions that allow both parties to contribute. The more interactions that occur allow more networks of support and more support is connected with organizational success (Houchin & MacLean, 2005). Collaboration is the process of moving the organization towards a specific unified goal (Houchin & MacLean, 2005). Cooperation is working in a reciprocal relationship to benefit one's own goals (Houchin & MacLean, 2005). The interaction of these two variables is integral to the success of an organization. Within the sport of football, it is essential that each team member maximizes their ability at their position. Cooperation is a necessary component of this task. Individuals need to be at their best to move towards a unified goal.

Organizational Values and Culture

Organizational culture is a significant consideration of leaders in the development of an elite winning program. Successful coaches define a set of key qualities for their program and deliberately create process to ensure these cultural values permeate throughout the organization (Biener, 2020, p. 50). To understand the role of values it is important to understand what values are considered desirable to coaches, how values are implemented and taught, and the ways values are reinforced to drive a culture forward. Schein (1990) proposed a three-level model to analyze culture that has become a standard by which to analyze sports culture. This model looks at culture through the lens of artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions (Biener, 2020). The following section will review Schein's (1990) model before examining literature on the reinforcement and teaching of values.

Schein Three-Level Model

The first level of Schein's model can be seen through the organization's artefacts (Biener, 2020). Artefacts include facilities, dress code, history, physical documents, and how people

address one another (Schein, 1990). Artefacts provide insights into some of the traits of an organization, but a challenge of artefacts is that they are difficult to decipher without the context of values and assumptions (Schein, 1990). The second level of the model are the values of the organization. Values are defined as the norms, ideologies, and philosophies of the organization (Biener, 2020; Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Values are a useful tool for determining why certain observed phenomena happen the way they do (Schein, 1990). The third level of the model focuses on the underlying assumptions of the organization. Assumptions are defined as the unconscious, taken for granted, and underlying beliefs that determine perceptions, feelings, thought processes, and behaviors (Schein, 1990). When taken together the artefacts, values, and assumptions of an organization provide a clear picture of the overarching values that drive the culture.

Desirable Values

Coaches often desire values that are targeted towards character and growth within sport. These values are often described as transcending sport and affecting the student-athletes for the rest of their lives. Biener (2020) grouped values into two categories: More than just a game and Our family. More than just a game values centred on excellence, growth, work ethic, and integrity (Biener, 2020). Our family values centred on themes of collaboration, authenticity, support, and respect.

More Than Just a Game

Coaches value commitment to the pursuit of excellence. This commitment to excellence should extend to athletes' performance on and off the field (Biener, 2020; Maitland, A., Hills, L., Rhind, D., 2015; Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Passion for the sport, competitiveness, and intensity are often connected with organizations that achieve excellence at a high level. Athletes

with the ability to focus will succeed in the pursuit of excellence as they are better able to concentrate their efforts (Biener, 2020). Finally, a strategic mind that understands the nuances of the game is an integral component of the pursuit of excellence (Biener, 2020). Strategic minds that understand the game allow for more creativity in the execution of strategy.

Continuous development and growth throughout the season and off-season is something coaches prize in elite cultures. The desire and effort to learn and grow is often described by coaches as an effective tool in limiting complacency within the program (Biener, 2020). Growth mindset is cited as an important component of continuous improvement. Successful cultures value the opportunity to learn from failure and use it as fuel to grow stronger from mistakes (Biener, 2020). Learning from mistakes creates momentum towards continuous growth that drives elite cultures.

Finally, work ethic and integrity are viewed as essential components of successful cultures. An emphasis on the need to work hard every day spans elite performance cultures (Biener, 2020; Maitland, A., Hills, L., Rhind, D., 2015); Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Preparation is embedded within the work ethic. Strong cultures prepare at high levels and do not allow distractions to interfere with their preparation. Coaches valued individuals acting with honesty and integrity within their program. Individuals that are dependable, punctual, and act in accordance with the guidelines of the athletic department and university are important traits of athletes that act with integrity (Biener, 2020). The ability to commit and put to paper a goal and then follow through with action is a defining feature of integrity.

Our Family

Coaches stress a family atmosphere as a desired value within their programs (Biener, 2020; Maitland, A., Hills, L., Rhind, D., 2015); Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Family atmospheres

are closely connected with the ways that members of the organization interact and relate with one another (Biener, 2020). There is a need for collaboration to perform at a high level. Collaboration requires communication to ensure everyone is on the same page (Biener, 2020). Coaches valued empowerment within their cultures. This involves including members in creating the vision for the team.   A collaborative environment requires all stakeholders in the organization working alongside one another (Biener, 2020). Along with collaboration, members of the organization need to be authentic. Being true to oneself requires vulnerability (Biener, 2020). This vulnerability is an important component to create trust within the program. When members of the team trust one another, they are best able to strive for excellence. Trust is an important component of building supportive and respectful relationships. It is important that these values extend throughout the program with all members, not just student athletes (Biener, 2020). Programs that create a strong family culture build a foundation for elite performance.

Teaching Values

It is not enough to state the values of a culture. Elite performance cultures succeed at teaching values in a way that allows them to be embraced and expressed throughout the organization. Successful cultures strive to define values together, introduce the values early, have teammates teach the values, and bring the core values to life through the teaching (Biener, 2020; Maitland, A., Hills, L., Rhind, D., 2015); Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Conscious understanding of culture better ensures that its influence will be strong and positive (Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018, p. 1205). Schein (1990) outlines that culture is that which is prominent and clear with a strong influence on direction. Programs with elite performance have clearly defined values that drive outcomes in a positive direction. Schein (2010) states that individuals with the most formal and informal influence must embrace the values and model them. This creates the

opportunity for multiple individuals within the organization to reinforce the culture (Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018).

Informal and formal leaders embracing cultural values leads to these leaders modeling and reinforcing the values and is essential to create breadth. Breadth occurs when the desired culture is present in all facets of an organization (Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Breadth leads to consistency. Once breadth is established, it allows the organization to better reinforce the key cultural values. Many teams will experience challenges or crises throughout a season. When the values have breadth and are well taught, members of the organization will better reinforce the values in times of crises or challenge. Research finds that informal rituals are the most effective for reinforcing team cultures (Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Rituals create opportunities for regular reinforcement points throughout the organization.

Theoretical Framework

Several theories made up and contributed to the framework of this study. The overarching belief, serving as a foundation for the case study, was that football programs at the FCS level are complex environments with diverse actors which organize around complex interactions. Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) acted as a foundational lens to view the information of this study. Two additional theoretical frameworks were applied in this study: The Container-Differences-Transforming Exchanges Model and Chelladurai's Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership (MMSL).

Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity Theory is rooted in the belief that individuals interact dynamically within an environment, influencing and being influenced by their environment (Morrison, 2002). Disruptions to the status quo cause an environment to change in unpredictable ways due to the

complex nature of an environment. Organizations or cultures can be disrupted or changed

through policy, leadership, education, and personnel changes (Kerschner & McQuillan, 2016).

Disruptions alter the climate and culture of an organization in significant ways by allowing

individuals and participants to develop new communication pathways, norms, and ideas. How

leaders facilitate the disruption determines whether the adaptive response is positive or negative.

While change is unpredictable, leaders can take steps to promote positive change. In Complexity

Theory, the establishment of decentralized networks, effective communication, building

infrastructure to develop team members, and the creation of common shared vision promotes

positive change (Kerschner & McQuillan, 2016). Disruptions thrust an organization to the edge

of chaos. Morrison (2002) found, "The closer one is propelled toward chaos, the more creative,

imaginative, diverse and rich are their behaviors" (p.22). Decentralized networks with a

common vision and strong communication channels, when pushed towards chaos promote

interactions among participants that lead to the sharing of ideas and the development of

innovative practices. Complexity Theory provided a strong theoretical framework upon which to

examine this football program.

Football programs rely on decentralized networks coming together to build a successful

team. The offense, defense, and special teams are the main groupings within a football program,

each with their own unique purpose and strategy. Within each of these groupings, there are

positional groups that require coaching and unique strategies to various scenarios that arise in the

game. Each grouping needs a coordinator that oversees the overarching vision for their grouping

in the team and positional coaches that provide specific development for the athletes. Each

coordinator must adhere to the head coach's vision. The head coach must shape their vision with

consideration for the athletics director's and president's vision for the university. Finally, each

player makes individual decisions through the course of practices and games that affect the

team's outcomes. Football requires a strong vision that unifies the team and trust that the various

decentralized networks within the team will carry out their role effectively for the team. For

these reasons, CLT was an essential component of my theoretical framework.

Eoyong's (2001) dissertation on self-organization within a complex adaptive system

(CAS) presents three conditions that shape self-organization within a human system. These three

meta-variables are: Containers (C), Significant Differences (D), and Transforming Exchanges

(E) (Martin, 2014). The Container-Differences-Exchanges Model (CDE Model) can be used to

explain the spontaneous generation of order within a complex system. Below, each of the

elements of the model will be explained.

Container (C)

Systems that self-organize must be differentiated from the surrounding environment. The

boundary that marks this differentiation serves as the container (Martin, 2014). Eoyang (2001)

states, "If there is no constraint on the agents, if there is nothing that defines the agents as a

group, if there is no condition that increases the probability of contact among the agents, then the

agents dissipate, and no new system wide structures or patterns can form" (p. 34). The Container

can be looked at as the unifying force that holds the system together and unites participants.

Containers can be external boundaries, central attracting forces, or one-to-one attracting forces

(Martin, 2014).

Difference (D)

The Container unites individuals with significant differences within a system, unit, or

team. Difference is defined as a distinction that creates a potential for movement or change

(Eoyang, 2001). Differences are essential for self-organizing to occur. If all of the individuals in

a system are identical, no interaction will occur (Eoyang, 2001). Organizations with too many differences will not sustain interactions among individuals. Eoyang and Holladay (2013) explain, "Differences that make a difference determine the speed and path and outcome of self-organizing processes. If there are too many differences, the system can't settle down. If there are not enough differences, change can't get started" (p. 28). Containers and Differences interact together to form Transforming Exchanges.

Transforming Exchanges (E)

Transforming Exchanges can be defined as a transfer of information, energy, or material between members that binds the parts of an organization together into a whole (Eoyang, 2001). Transforming exchanges can involve communication, transactions, non-verbal actions, and many other forms. The interaction of Containers (C) and Differences (D) are necessary for Transforming Exchanges to develop self-organizing processes. If the Containers are too rigid or not rigid enough, exchanges appear random and no patterns arise (Eoyang, 2001). If differences are too great or too small, interactions become redundant and opportunities for transformation will not present themselves (Eoyang, 2001).

This case study examined the interactions within a FCS college football program through the lens of the CDE Model to find patterns that exist within the complex environment. The study sought to discover what Containers (C), Differences (D), and Transforming Exchanges (E) allowed unprecedented success within this program.

Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership

Chelladurai (1978) believed it necessary to develop a scale to identify the dimensions of leader behaviors that are relevant to sport. There were assumptions made in regard to the unique characteristics of sports: 1) the tasks (rules) governing sport are the same for both female and

male participants, 2) members of sports teams spend a disproportionate amount of time preparing

for a competition that is a couple of hours in length, 3) athletics are zero-sum games with only

one winner and members of teams continue to strive knowing they may be deprived of the

reward of winning, 4) teams have a short duration often lasting three to six months (Chelladurai,

1978). Through this research, five dimensions of leadership behavior in sport were established.

Table 3 summarizes these leadership dimensions (Chelladurai, 1978).

Table 3

Leadership Behavior Dimensions in Sport

Dimension	Description
Training Behavior	Behavior aimed at improving the performance level of the athletes by emphasizing and facilitating hard and strenuous training, by clarifying the relationship among the members, and by structuring and coordinating the activities of the members.
Democratic Behavior	Behavior of the coach which allows greater participation by the athletes in deciding on group goals, practice methods, and game tactics and strategies.
Autocratic Behavior	Tendency of the coach to set himself apart from the athletes, and to make all decisions by themself.
Social Support	Behavior of the coach indicating concern for individual athletes, their welfare, for positive group atmosphere, and for warm interpersonal relations with members.
Rewarding Behavior	Behavior of the coach which provides reinforcements for an athlete by recognizing and rewarding good performance.

The MMSL depicts three types of leadership behavior: the leadership behavior warranted by the task, the leadership behavior desired by members, and the actual leader behavior (Chelladurai, 1978). Actual behavior is determined by the member preferences, task demands, personality disposition, and information base. Preferred leader behavior is a function of individual differences in personality and ability interacting with task characteristics. The MMSL provided a foundation for this study to examine the behavior of leadership within the Bison football team and determine the dimensions of sport leadership that contributed to the unprecedented success of the program. The dimension of sport leadership served as an anchor in this study when determining the behaviors that contributed to the unprecedented run of the Bison.

Conclusion

This thesis is presented in five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction, the purpose of the study, the importance of the study, the background of the author, the background of the program studied, study questions, literature gaps, limitations, delimitations, and key terms defined. The second chapter examines the literature on athlete leadership, coach leadership, administrative leadership, complexity leadership theory, and a theoretical framework for the study. The third chapter provides the methodology for this study. The fourth chapter examines and analyzes the data of the case study. Finally, the fifth chapter shares the conclusions and implications of the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

This qualitative case study (Yin, 2018) examined the North Dakota State Bison football program to determine factors that have contributed to the program's unprecedented success. Specifically, the study sought to determine coaching behaviours, leadership development

practices, and strategies that influence complex systems in how they organize, adapt, and succeed at high levels. Eoyang's (2001) CDE Model was used to clarify contributing factors to the program's success. The model views diverse systems and examines the containers that unify the system and push it towards success (Eoyang, 2001). Successful systems bind Containers and Differences together to form a highly functioning system.

There is significant interest in the leadership and coaching community to examine how coaching behaviours contribute to the overall success of a program (Williams, 2010). Athlete development and its contribution to the success of a program is another literature gap that this study seeks to address (Williams, 2010). Williams (2010) highlighted the need for more qualitative research in the form of interviews and observations as an important area of further research. This study provides valuable insight into coaching behaviors and athlete development through the examination of the most successful FCS program in history. Data from this study contributes to the existing research on sports leadership.

This study bolsters knowledge on the interaction between coaching style and university philosophy blending to create a culture of success. Martinov (2003) identified the need for further research in this area. Often, coaching philosophies can conflict with both university and conference philosophies. Reconciling this conflict is a necessary component in building a successful culture. Athletic Directors play a significant role in setting a vision for collegiate teams (Van den Steen, 2003; Schein, 2004). Teams must consider and align with the vision the President sets for the institution (Christian, 2017). Successful teams navigate these interactions to build a unified culture. The NDSU Bison organization provided meaningful insights into approaches that successfully navigate these relationships.

Finally, literature highlighted a need to further examine the benefits of hiring new coaches from outside of a program versus hiring an assistant coach from within the program (Dohrn, Lopez, & Reinhardt, 2015). NDSU will provided a unique perspective on this question, as all head coaches they hired during their dynasty were assistants who had previously worked for the program.

Research Questions

The following questions will guide the research to more fully understand the factors that have contributed to the unprecedented and sustained success of the Bison Football program:

1.   What unifiers and values have contributed to and defined the unprecedented success of the Bison dynasty? (Containers)

   2.   How did these unifiers and values overcome the tremendous challenges of sustaining success at the FCS level? (Differences)

   3.   What strategies were used to create the opportunity for interactions that develop shared values and unify diverse elements of the program towards a common goal? (Exchanges)

Qualitative Research

This study used a qualitative approach to research focused on small samples selected deliberately to allow the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge of phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p. 46). If the researcher is purposeful in selecting their sample, it will create the opportunity to learn a great deal about issues of importance to the purpose of the research (Patton, 2002, p. 46).

Qualitative research tends to collect data at the site where participants experience the issue to be studied (Creswell, 2014). Up-close information gathered by talking directly to people and seeing them behave is a central aspect of qualitative research. This research is interpretive

and develops a description of the setting and the experience of the individuals. Qualitative

studies allow the researcher to develop significant information on a small number of people or

cases, but it also reduces generalizability (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2014) emphasizes the

importance of qualitative studies using multiple sources of data in the form of interviews,

observations, documents, and audiovisual information. This data is organized and reviewed to

make sense of categories or themes that exist across all the data sources. Qualitative studies are

excellent for studying an area of phenomenon where little is known or the case is unique to

current data (Willenbrock, 2009).

A qualitative study was selected because the literature has shown that it is very rare for a

football program to win nine national championships in twelve years with multiple head coach

and athletic director changes (Adler et al., 2012; Dronyk-Trosper & Stitzel, 2017). The literature

also shows that head coaches and athletics directors play the most significant role in building a

successful sports culture (Adler et al., 2012; Dronyk-Trosper & Stitzel, 2017). Programs that do

not have a clear vision and culture established by their coach and athletic director often struggle

(Heil, 2018). A qualitative design allowed the researcher to focus on the Athletics Director and

Head Coach at NDSU who played an important role in engineering the program's unprecedented

success. These individuals played a disproportionate role in building the dynasty.

Research Epistemology and Worldview

As an individual, I lean towards a Postpositivist worldview. My personal stance aligns

with Postpositivism in that I believe research seeks to develop true statements that explain

situations. Being objective is an important component of inquiry. Truth exists, but it can be

difficult to find. In Postpositivism a researcher begins with a theory, makes necessary revisions,

and conducts additional tests as required (Creswell, 2014). This worldview aligns closely with

the scientific method. There are many sources of knowledge that can explain theories we hold as

authoritative in explaining the world around us. Postpositivists hold that there may be other

theories compatible with evidence on the nature of the world around us (Philips, 2014). The

purpose of the researcher is to provide warrants and justifications to support the acceptance of a

theory as authoritative (Philips, 2014). Good warrants can provide a level of certainty around

certain theories, but it is important that research be exposed to open scrutiny and critique to

ensure that external values do not influence the development of theories. These values very

much align with my epistemological and ontological stance.

The Bison football program has a strong football culture which greatly influences the

direction of the program. It was important to gain insight into the personal perspectives of

participants in this study via open-ended questions. Those interviewed in this study played a

significant role in the development of the coaches and athletes within the Bison football

program. Their perspectives and insights into the overall direction of the program needed to be

studied to understand their contributing factors to the program's unprecedented success. In

understanding the participants' perspectives, the researcher was able to propose the most likely

explanation of the program's success.   In making sense of the meanings derived from these

individuals, theories that justify the success can be proposed. While this may seem to align with

a constructivist approach, the ultimate focus of this study is to uncover the best explanation of

the truth behind success of the Bison.

Postpositivism holds that there are many sources of knowledge and the purpose of

research is to support the acceptance of a theory (Philips, 2014). While the case study approach

is traditionally aligned with a constructivist worldview, the Yinian approach to case study does

align well with the Postpositivist worldview. Yin (2018) is one of the preeminent authorities on

case studies in the field of education. He has sought to bring legitimacy to case study as a research method in Social Sciences. Much of his writing has an orientation towards positivism (Yazan, 2015). Objectivity, validity, and generalizability of research are fundamental notions in a positivistic approach. Yin strongly advocates for construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability in his approach to case study (Yazan, 2015). He is very concerned with the quality of data and for this reason aligns with positivism. Yin believes that there are many commonalities between qualitative and quantitative research and does not distinguish between the two methods in his approach to case study (Yazan, 2015). It is my belief that the Yinian approach to case study aligns well with my postpositivist worldview. This study sought to maintain a Yinian approach by developing clear interview protocols, interviewing a range of participants, having clear and consistent data analysis protocols, and member checking.

Research Design

A case study approach was the appropriate form of inquiry for this study. Case study allowed for exploration into the coaching strategies, player development strategies, and structures that built the foundation for the NDSU Bison football program. Case studies examine contemporary phenomenon within their context (Shareia, 2016). This method of design is advantageous when asking how or why questions about a set of events (Willenbrock, 2009). A case study allowed for an in-depth analysis of how the athletics director, coaches, and players engineered the most successful run in FCS history. Three prominent methodologists within the case study world are Robert Yin, Sharan Marriam, and Robert Stake. Both Stake and Merriam take a purely constructivist epistemological approach to case study, while Yin has positivist orientation in his approach (Yazan, 2015). For this reason, a Yinian approach was used in this case study.

Yin (2018) takes the stance that every empirical study has an implicit, if not explicit, research design (p.24). He believes that a case study is strengthened by articulating a theory about what is to be learned. Theoretical propositions pave the way to allow analytic generalizations from your case study (Yin, 2018). Study questions should seek to answer "how" and "why" questions from Yin's perspective. This aligned closely with the purpose of this study, which was to answer the question of how the Bison have maintained their success despite changes in leadership. There was a clearly defined case to study in the Bison football program and the focus of the study was the coaches, players, and athletics director. Yin (2018) says that questions should lead to the favoring of some cases over the others as this allows for the gathering of data that is not too vague. Naturally through the literature review and development of the study questions, it became clear that there needed to be a focus on the Head Coach and Athletics Director's role in building the Bison program.

In a case study, the researcher can expect to make many judgement calls (Yin, 2018). Researchers need to be prepared to address uncertainties that may arise and this requires a firm knowledge base, the ability to ask good questions, and finally the ability to see new situations as opportunities, not threats (Yin, 2018). My experience in the sport of football and my background in using questioning in my professional practice lent themselves to the case study approach.

Case study evidence can come from documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2018). This study focused on capturing the distinct perspective of coaches and athletics directors and their influence on the success of the Bison. Interviews, direct observations, and participant-observations lend themselves to this study and fit well within the case study approach. Yin (2018) emphasizes the following principles of data collection: use multiple sources of evidence, create a database of the

case study, use a chain of evidence, exercise care when using data from social media sources. Multiple sources of evidence are a prerequisite for an in-depth study of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Having a database of case study work allows other persons to inspect your work and will markedly increase the reliability of your study (Yin, 2018). Maintaining a chain of evidence allows readers of the study to trace the steps of a researcher back to the initial questions. The chain of evidence, if done properly, lends itself to the consistency of the study (Yin, 2018).

The analysis of data in a case study can involve pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018). Yin's approach to case study allows for flexibility in analyzing data to allow the researcher to follow promising patterns, insights, or concepts. Yin (2018) emphasizes the need for an analytic strategy. Many researchers start a case without defining how the evidence will be analyzed. These studies often stall at the analytic stage. For this reason, Yin (2018) encourages researchers to clearly define their analytic approach.

The final aspect of a case study is the composition of findings (Yin, 2018). It is important that the researcher spend time thinking prior to composing the findings. The findings should be written with the audience for the research in mind to ensure a level of concreteness in the findings (Yin, 2018). The study should be oriented to the needs of the audience. There are a variety of study compositions, but this study followed the single-case composition (Yin, 2018). This format uses as single text, supplemented with charts, graphics, and images, to highlight the case.

Sample Selection and Participants

The sample selection and participants were carefully selected for this study. Patton (2002) places an emphasis on examining cases that could most benefit the research and selecting

those cases for study. It is also important to pick the case or site that will reveal the most

information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge (Patton, 2002).

These factors greatly influenced the decision to interview the Head Coach and Athletics Director.

Football is a hierarchical sport, athletic directors and head coaches have a significant role in

establishing the culture and values of successful teams. These individuals will yield the most

information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge regarding building

and sustaining a successful culture. Assistant coaches and student athlete leaders were selected

to participate in focus groups. Their knowledge of the program contributed to determining

alignment between the culture and values of the Athletics Director and Head Coach and the

assistant coaches and student athlete leaders.

The interviews with the Head Coach and Athletics Director are intended to dive deep into

the organizational culture and values that guided the Bison program to unprecedented success.

Central questions of this study sought to discover the values that contributed to the success of the

program and how these values overcame the challenges of sustaining success at the FCS level.

Research shows that head coaches and athletic directors play a significant role in developing the

values, beliefs, and structures of a collegiate athletics program (Adler, 2012; Christian, 2016).

An interview was conducted with the current Head Coach to determine their perspective on the

development and sustained success of the program. The current Athletics Director was

interviewed as well. These individuals provided important insights into current literature gaps on

coaching philosophy, athlete development, and insights into best practices for hiring new

coaches. These interviews included open ended questions that sought to uncover the views and

opinions of each the Head Coach and Athletics Director.

Assistant coaches and student athlete leaders were selected for focus groups because of their well-known investment and commitment to the program. The reasons for their selection as participants include: (a) they have a commitment to the program (b) they are the key models and exemplars of the organizational culture and values desired by the AD and Head Coach; and (c) they will be able to provide unique insights to elements of Bison Football. Focus groups were conducted with assistant coaches and student leaders separately from the interviews with the Athletics Director and Head Coach. The purpose of these focus groups was to determine the organizations level of success in building culture and values within the program and the contributions they made the success of the organization.

Positionality

Football is a unique sport because it requires a large group of diverse individuals to come together and unify around a common goal. If the diverse players and coaches cannot come together around a common goal, often that team will struggle. Football is also a very academic game, in many ways like chess, that requires tremendous strategy and study of one's opponent to succeed. Understanding the nuances of the game often requires proximity to the game and years of experience with the sport. In this regard, the background and personal stance of the researcher should be identified.

The researcher has been involved with the sport of football for twenty-three years. This involvement includes time as an athlete at both the high school and university level, thirteen years' experience as a coach, and a lifelong fan of the sport. Yin (2004) suggests in a case study there should be a strong preference for the researcher to have previous experience in the sport, be aware of current issues in the sport, and have analyzed similar issues in the past. He states, "If you know your subject matter as a result of previous investigations and publications, so much the better"

(Yin, 2018, p. 124). This background in the sport of football provided a clarifying lens through which the research can be viewed. While this background could have potentially provided issues of bias, it did provide an advantage in terms of understanding the information and establishing depth to the study that an individual with no football background would struggle to bring.

The first time I was exposed to the Bison was in 2010, at the start of the Bison dynasty, while my brother was playing football at Minot State University in North Dakota. We had many conversations on the strength of the program and their potential to win a championship. The next season, the Bison won their first FCS National Championship and proceeded to win another seven over the 2010's and another in the 2020's. From that point on, I have closely followed the program and watched many of their championship games. This positioned me to have strong knowledge of the program and their history which served as a benefit in this study.

Data Collection

A central aspect of qualitative research is the triangulation of data. One of the strengths of case study data collection is the ability to use many different sources of evidence (Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) states that multiple sources of evidence allow for the converging of lines of inquiry and the triangulation of data. Triangulation increases the validity of findings and results as the strengths of one approach can compensate for the weaknesses of another (Patton, 2002). Multiple sources of data are important, as no single source can provide a comprehensive perspective on the football program. This study will be triangulated through the use of in-depth interviews with open ended questions with coaches and athletics directors and focus groups with assistant coaches and players in leadership positions.

Interviews with Coaches and Athletics Directors

Both the Head Coach and Athletics Director were sent a formal letter of invitation (Appendix A) regarding participation in the one-to-one interview. They were interviewed individually to allow each participant the opportunity to express their individual experiences and contributions to building the Bison football dynasty. The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and digitally recorded for future transcription. The Head Coach was asked questions regarding their role as a coach (Appendix B) and the Athletics Director was asked questions unique to their role (Appendix C). The interviews were conducted after the season was complete and in accordance with the interview protocol (Appendix E).

When considering interviewees, the researcher should consider if the data required can be obtained from these participants (Foley et al., 2021). The researcher should consider that an interview is not a fact-finding mission, but a tool to open inquiry that assists in building theoretical oriented accounts of the phenomena studied (Sbaraini et al., 2011). Finally, it is important that the researcher formulate a small number of questions with the view that questions serve as a device to launch data collection (Foley et al., 2021). When looking at culture, the Athletics Director and Head Coach play a significant role in determining the organizational culture within a football program. These individuals provided key information on the vision for the program's culture and strategies used to implement the culture. Questions for these individuals were focused on strategies and steps taken to build a successful culture that is driven by strong values.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a way of listening to people and learning from them (Morgan, 1997). Researchers should use focus groups as a tool to create conversation that they can listen to and

learn from. They provide great opportunities for exploration and discovery, context and depth, and interpretation (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups are open-ended to allow for discussion but focused on the researcher's interests in the study (Morgan, 1997). They produce a large amount of data in a short time. A key use of focus groups is assessment of a situation (Morgan, 1997, p. 15). The focus groups with players and assistant coaches were used to see how effectively the desired culture and values of the Athletics Director and Head Coach spread through the program. Questions (Appendix D) were focused on building discussion about the values of the program, how they are determined and implemented, and if the ideas of the focus groups aligned with those of the Athletics Director and Head Coach.

Data Analysis

It is important to outline the steps of analyzing various forms of qualitative data to ensure that the larger meaning of the data can be interpreted (Creswell, 2014. "Within the specific boundaries of a research project, data analysis is critical to success. Without understanding how to analyze data, a researcher will not be able to interpret that data, nor draw any conclusions or recommendations from it. The researcher will not be able to assess the effectiveness of his or her research design and will be prevented from presenting anything meaningful" (Brewerton & Millward, 2001, p. 143). Yin (1994) states that the ultimate goal of a case study is to treat evidence fairly to produce compelling conclusions and rule out alternative interpretations.

General Strategy

Upon completion of the interviews and focus groups, the recordings of the interviews were listened to and transcribed using Microsoft Teams transcription service. Focus was placed on interpreting one interview/focus group at a time with the goal of identifying key ideas and important data within the interview/focus group. Yin (2018) suggests writing memos or notes as

the data is reviewed. Each time the transcripts were received, further connections and new details were added using a color-coded highlighting to determine Containers, Differences, and Exchanges. Memos were added using post it notes to clarify the researcher's thinking. The focus of this review was to determine themes that fit with Eoyang's (2001) CDE model. To facilitate this process, upon review of each transcript, sections of the interview/focus group that provided rich data were thoroughly studied to help in coding information within the CDE model. Key data was sorted and classified into unifying forces or boundaries (Containers), factors that create the potential for movement or change (Differences), and exchanges that occur as a result of interactions to unify the group (Transforming Exchanges).

Procedures

Once the data from the interviews and focus groups was sorted into Containers, Differences, and Transforming Exchanges, it was coded with a focus on finding themes within the key elements of each theme.

Creswell (2014) encourages the researcher to "winnow" the data, focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts. As the data was coded, common themes that were consistent among the Athletic Director and Head Coach was prioritized to develop the central themes of the study. This winnowing of the data focused on key contributing factors.

Once the key themes within the CDE model were determined, the findings were interpreted to answer the question "What were the contributing factors that allowed for the Bison's unprecedented success?". These contributing factors were then compared with prior research highlighted in the literature review.

Validity and Reliability

Qualitative validity means that the research uses procedures to check the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative reliability means that the researcher's approach is consistent across different research and projects (Creswell, 2014). This study provided validity by triangulating different data sources and using them to build coherent justification for themes. The bias of the researcher was clarified and reflection occurred on how the background of the researcher influenced the findings. Information that runs counter to the themes presented was considered to highlight different perspectives in the data. The transcript of the interview was shared with participants through a member check. Each participant was provided the opportunity to clarify and update the transcript to ensure their statements were accurately represented. Finally, a peer was used to debrief and ask questions about the qualitative study to ensure that the study will resonate with others. Reliability was ensured in the study by reviewing transcripts to ensure they did not contain obvious mistakes and ensuring there was no drift in codes by consistently comparing the data with codes.

Ethical Considerations

There were several important ethical considerations to make given the design of this qualitative case study. Interviews were a key component of the study and consideration was given to the consent of participants. The privacy and confidentiality of the participants was considered. Finally, consideration was given to the timing of the study to ensure it fit with the participants.

Prior to the interview/focus group process with the Head Coach, Athletics Director, assistant coaches, and players each participant was sent a formal invitation that outlined the studies purpose, provided information on the study, and shared necessary information and

components to ensure informed consent according to article 3.2 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research involving Humans (TCPS 2). Please see Appendix A for this invitation. Consent was documented through participants emailing their consent from the declaration included with Appendix A. This was used to confirm each participants informed consent.

Conclusion to Chapter Three

There are five chapters in this case study. The first chapter provides an introduction, the purpose of the study, the importance of the study, the background of the author, the background of the program studied, study questions, literature gaps, limitations, delimitations, and key terms defined. The second chapter examines the literature on athlete leadership, coach leadership, administrative leadership, complexity leadership theory, and a theoretical framework for the study. Chapter three outlined the methodological approach to this qualitative case study. The epistemology, study design, research questions, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations were shared in this chapter. The fourth chapter examines and analyzes the data of the case study. Finally, the fifth chapter shares the conclusions and implications of the study.

Chapter 4: Presentation and Analysis of Data

This study examined the North Dakota State Bison football program to determine factors that influenced their sustained success.   The purpose of this study was to determine coaching behaviours, leadership development practices, and strategies that influence complex systems in how they organize, adapt, and succeed at high levels. It is very rare for a program to experience sustained success with changes in leadership, specifically changes in head coach.

Complexity theory was a key part of the theoretical framework of this study. Complexity theory is rooted in the belief that individuals interact dynamically within an environment,

influencing and being influenced by their environment (Morrison, 2002). Disruptions to the status quo cause a system to reorganize. Disruptions alter the climate and culture of an organization in significant ways by allowing individuals and participants to develop new communication pathways, norms, and ideas. How leaders facilitate disruption determines whether the adaptive response is positive or negative. While change is unpredictable, leaders can take steps to promote positive change. In Complexity Theory, the establishment of decentralized networks, effective communication, building infrastructure to develop team members, and the creation of common shared vision promotes positive change (Kerschner & McQuillan, 2016). This framework defined the study's questions and guided the researcher in determining factors that influenced Bison success.

In addressing the organizational culture and values that influenced North Dakota State Bison Footballs' unprecedented success, this chapter describes the conceptualization of who was interviewed in the study, the demographic profiles of individuals interviewed, and themes found in the data. The themes will be presented from Interviews (Athletics Director and Head Coach) and Focus Groups (Assistant Coach and Player) using Eoyang's (2001) CDE Model. The study's results are framed by Eoyang's (2001) CDE Model of Containers, Differences, and Exchanges to clarify contributing factors to the team's success. The model views diverse systems and examines the containers that unify the system and push it towards success (Eoyang, 2001). Successful systems bind containers and differences together to form a highly functioning system (Eoyang, 2001). The study focused on coaching strategies, structures, and leadership development practices that influenced the NDSU Bison system regarding how it organizes, adapts, and succeeds at a high level.

Interview Selection

Six individuals were invited to participate in the Focus Groups and Interviews of this study. The Athletics Director and Head Coach both agreed to participate in a one-on-one interview. Two coaches and two players agreed to participate in the Focus Groups. The participants were carefully selected for this study. Patton (2002) places an emphasis on examining cases that could most benefit the research and selecting those cases to study. The reasons for everyone's selection included: (a) they have a commitment to the program (b) they are the key models and exemplars of the organizational culture and values desired by the Athletics Director and Head Coach; and (c) they provide unique insights to important elements of Bison Football. It was important to pick the individuals that would reveal the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge (Patton, 2002). Football is a hierarchical sport, athletics directors and head coaches have a significant role in establishing the culture and values of successful teams. These individuals were selected to yield the most information and have the greatest influence on the development of knowledge regarding building and sustaining a successful culture. Assistant coaches and student athletes were selected to share their knowledge of the program. This was to assist in determining alignment between the culture and values shared by the Athletics Director and Head Coach and the assistant coaches and student athletes.

Veteran participants were selected to provide unique perspectives based on consistent involvement with the program across changes in leadership. New participants were included to provide unique perspectives on their initial experience with the culture and values of the Bison football program. The focus groups were affirming factors that contributed to the organization's success in establishing their culture and values with the team.

Demographic Profile

The demographic profile of the participants in the study is shared in the following section. The relevant demographic data presented will be the participant's title/position, time with the program, and background with the program.

Athletics Director

The Athletics Director was hired in October of 2014 as the 18th Director of Athletics at NDSU. They have been in their current position with the university for 9 years. Previously, they served as a Chief Financial Officer with another institution's athletics department for 19 years. Throughout the interview they displayed a clear passion for building a strong athletics department at NDSU. The Athletics Director spoke with strong conviction on the importance of character and leadership as essential components of Bison athletes. He displayed clear drive for excellence in providing funding, resources, and top-quality facilities for the Bison. Finally, they displayed an openness to share their knowledge of the football program.

Head Coach

The Head Coach has been with the NDSU Bison since 2014. He served as the defensive coordinator for five seasons and has served as head coach since the 2019 season. Previously, he served as an assistant coach with five other football programs starting in 1998. The Head Coach had a clear passion for the game of football combined with a strong ability to build relationships. This was evident from the researcher's initial conversation with the Head Coach. They were very willing to help in all aspects of the research. This individual had strong communication skills that allowed them to clearly communicate what it means to be a Bison.

Assistant Coaches

The veteran assistant coach has been involved with the Bison football program as a player, assistant coach, and coordinator. He played for the Bison from 2004 until 2008. In 2014, he returned to the program as an assistant coach and was promoted to his current role as offensive coordinator in 2019. It was very clear through the interview that the offensive coordinator had significant knowledge of the Bison football program. They were passionate about developing student athletes into well rounded individuals with the skills to be successful in all aspects of life. They displayed a strong knowledge of the processes and values that shaped the Bison experience.

The new assistant coach joined the Bison football program in February of 2023. Previously, he served as an assistant coach at the FBS level for five seasons and has coached at the FCS level for nine seasons. This coach brought a unique perspective to the different cultures of high-level football programs. Their experience in multiple football programs and previous knowledge of the Bison football program allowed them to provide valuable insights. This individual was soft spoken but had a real depth of knowledge on factors that influence football culture. This coach spoke with precision that was influenced by their experience in college football.

Student Athletes

The veteran student athlete is currently a senior entering their sixth season with the Bison football program. They play on the Bison defense and have participated in the program with two head coaches, most of which has been under the current head coach. This player is from the Fargo area and displayed a strong knowledge of the community. This player spoke with conviction when discussing the history and tradition of the Bison. You could tell the positive

influence previous players had on developing this player into a strong leader within the football program. He displayed a strong knowledge of leadership practices. Finally, he very clearly communicated the positive influence of Bison football in all aspects of his life.

The new player just completed their freshman season with the Bison. They play on the defense and come from Minnesota. This player brings the perspective of a newcomer to the team. This individual displayed humility and willingness to learn. Through their communication, it became clear that this player had learned tremendous amounts in their first year with the program. Through the interview, this individual displayed many of the values that define what it means to be a Bison.

Table 3

Participant Experience Chart

Participant	Experience
Athletic Director	Nine years' experience with NDSU.
Head Coach	Nine years' experience with NDSU.
Offensive Coordinator	Thirteen years' experience with NDSU.
Receivers Coach	Less than one year experience with NDSU.
Veteran Player	Six years' experience with NDSU.
Freshman Player	One year of experience with NDSU.

Data Analysis and Themes

The data and themes presented in this section will be organized based on the interviews and focus groups. The data from each interview and focus group will be organized into the Containers (C), Differences (D), and Exchanges (E) that were described through the qualitative study and data analysis. The Containers that emerged in this study are the identity, values, continuity, and the community of Fargo, North Dakota. The Differences that emerged in this

study are expectations and recruiting philosophy. Finally, the Exchanges that emerged in this study include player leadership and the process. Each element of the CDE Model is reviewed below to assist in reminding readers of the theoretical framework.

Containers (C)

Systems that self-organize must be differentiated from the surrounding environment. The boundary that marks this differentiation serves as the container (Martin, 2014). Eoyang (2001) states, "If there is no constraint on the agents, if there is nothing that defines the agents as a group, if there is no condition that increases the probability of contact among the agents, then the agents dissipate, and no new system wide structures or patterns can form" (p. 34). The container can be looked at as the unifying force that holds the system together and unites participants. Containers can be external boundaries, central attracting forces, or one-to-one attracting forces (Martin, 2014). For example, the philosophy of a football program as a run-first or pass-first team serves as an external boundary that defines a football program.

Differences (D)

The Container unites individuals with significant differences within a system, unit, or team. Difference is defined as a distinction that creates a potential for movement or change (Eoyang, 2001). Differences are essential for self-organizing to occur. If all the individuals in a system are identical, no interaction will occur (Eoyang, 2001). Organizations with too many differences will not sustain interactions among individuals. Eoyang and Holladay (2013) explain, "differences that make a difference determine the speed, path, and outcome of self-organizing processes. If there are too many differences, the system cannot settle down. If there are not enough differences, change cannot get started" (p. 28). Containers and Differences interact together to form Transforming Exchanges. The recruiting philosophy of a program

interacts with the philosophy that defines said program create is a difference. It creates

distinction that requires transforming exchanges to overcome.

Transforming Exchanges (E)

Transforming Exchanges can be defined as a transfer of information, energy, or material

between members that bind the parts of an organization together into a whole (Eoyang, 2001).

Transforming exchanges can involve communication, transactions, non-verbal actions, and many

other forms. The interaction of Containers (C) and Differences (D) are necessary for

Transforming Exchanges to develop self-organizing processes. If the Containers are too rigid or

not rigid enough, exchanges appear random and no patterns arise (Eoyang, 2001). If differences

are too great or too small, interactions become redundant and opportunities for transformation

will not present themselves (Eoyang, 2001).

Containers

Through the data analysis of interviews and focus groups, three containers emerged.

Identity, values, and community are containers discovered from the data analysis of this case

study. The interviews with the Athletics Director and Head Coach were analyzed to determine

the containers and the focus groups with assistant coaches and players were examined for

alignment with the values shared by the Athletics Director and Head Coach. All participants in

this case study presented consistent perspectives on the values and structures that support the

NDSU football program. Through data analysis, it became clear that the Bison football program

has a clear identity of what it means to be a Bison. The core values that the program espouses

are consistent and all participants clearly articulated that Bison values include toughness,

character, work ethic, and leadership. Finally, the community of Fargo serves as an important

Container for the Bison football program. Specifically, the community's geographic location and support for the program. Each of these containers will be examined in detail below.

Identity

Containers serve as boundaries, central draws, and unifying forces within the CDE Model. One of the key boundaries within Bison football is the identity of the football program. Bison football is known to run the football, win the line of scrimmage on offense and defense, and control the clock. This identity has been a defining feature of the program for decades. The first mention of this came from the Athletics Director when he was discussing the hiring of a new Head Coach. As the Athletics Director described the hiring process, he stated:

> We're a program that focuses on the trenches, good offensive and defensive line play. We play good defense and we run the ball primarily. For us to bring in somebody who will run the spread offense, that is not who we are. Understanding who we are really helps.

This quote highlights the value the school places on core identity. The Athletics Director clearly states that bringing in an individual to lead the program who will deviate from this identity is not who they are as a program.   Understanding the identity of the program really helps in determining who can lead the program. He further expands on this idea by expressing:

> It's about hiring folks that understand our culture. When you look historically, our head coaches have been in our program in one way or another. They understand our program expectations, our community expectations, our fan expectations. In their time with the program, they get a good understanding of the type of kids and the characteristics that drive success in the program.

This thought touches on a key feature of the football program, they hire head coaches from within the program. The three most recent head coaches have all served as assistant coaches with the program prior to becoming the head coach. This allows them to learn the culture, identity, and values deeply and maintain continuity within the program. Coaches that know the team's identity have been able to successfully maintain it and pass it along to new members of the program.

This idea was expanded upon by the Head Coach in his interview. When discussing the identity of the football program (wining the line of scrimmage, running the ball, and controlling the clock) he stated, "that's part of our process and goes back to our core values." In discussing this idea, he stated that the Bison are a process-based football team, not a results-based football team. The team is focused on understanding the process of success as opposed achieving metrics or stats. He expands on this idea by saying:

> We believe in being a line of scrimmage-based football team, that's our philosophy. When it comes to recruiting, that's our philosophy. As far as our practice is set up, everything is going to stem around winning the line of scrimmage, and we feel like if we can do that, we have a great opportunity to be successful. We need to have an effective run game, we need to win the time of possession, and then throw ball security in there and you've really encompassed some of the major caveats that are necessary to win in college football these days.

Here, the Head Coach describes how the identity of the Bison influences the structures and processes that build a foundation for the team to be successful. This identity is an essential component to the culture established at NDSU.

A new assistant coach, coaching the receivers, expanded on this idea as he discussed the NDSU Bison brand. This coach had previously coached against the Bison and was familiar with their style of play and identity. In discussing this, he said:

> I have followed the program, from being in the league, and I know the program because of the people here that I know and know well. Coming into spring practice I wanted to observe the traditions of Bison Football. I knew Bison Football is about running the football. We will control the clock… and there's a toughness and a discipline to that. And defensively we're going to be a four-down team, we are going to do what we do. We are going to be tough, stop the run, be physical up front. Those are just some of the simple things that I associated with Bison football.

As a coach outside of the program, he was aware of this identity, which confirms this identity is not something the program hides from.

This identity carries itself down to the players. In the focus group with players, when discussing sustaining Bison football culture, both players shared perspectives that align with this identity being a core component of the program. The sixth-year senior described the importance of setting a good example. When describing how to sustain culture he stated, "lead by example, it's not reinventing the wheel, we have had a good culture for a long time". He further stated that he needed to act like previous veterans of the program. This establishes the continuity of the identity and the importance of players living out the identity of individuals who came before them. The freshmen in the program stated the importance of reminding others of the standards. In describing the standards of the program and maintaining them, the freshman stated, "I reflect what they (veterans) say to me to younger guys when they come into the program." He believed that by reflecting these standards, he can lead new players and influence them.

The identity of being a team that controls the line of scrimmage, controls the clock, and runs the football appeared as a clear Container within the Bison football program. The Athletics Director communicated in the interview, "freshman that come in and don't conform to the way we do it here at NDSU, probably don't last very long." The identity is a key boundary on the program that determines who will last within the program and who will not last. This identity unites the members of the program and provides a clear and stable foundation which defines the processes of the program. When there are clear parameters set around who and what an organization is, individuals are better able to determine if they align with the organization.

Values (Bison Pride)

All participants were asked to share what they believe to be core values of Bison football. The answers were consistent and can be connected to the concept of Bison Pride. Although participants stated that there is no one definition of Bison Pride, their answer to the question on core values expressed a consistent set of values. Bison Pride, based on the interviews and focus groups, can be described as toughness, selflessness, accountability, character, leadership, and work ethic. While each participant used different words to describe these values, when they explained them, a consistent picture was presented. Another theme that emerged among the interviews was the values expressed have defined the team for decades and have influenced how the program recruits both coaches and players.

The Athletics Director stated the values as, "work ethic, character, being in, and selflessness". He talked about the importance of playing for the guy next to you, which aligns with selflessness as a core value. It is often stated teams are only as strong as their weakest link. Selflessness requires players to think about the team before themselves, to think about collective success instead of individual success. The Athletics Director expressed when the team recruits,

"it's not just purely about talent, it's about character, about being part of a team." Success at the Football Championship Subdivision level requires significant sacrifice and study. Success is not possible without players who have a strong desire and work ethic to improve. Players who do not buy into the program and lack character will struggle to be successful. The Athletics Director closed by stating, "These things carried over the course of time have been a big part of our success." This statement shows a strong belief that the values of the program are a significant contributor to success.

The Head Coach explained that certain values may be prioritized from season to season based upon team needs. He clarified consistent points of emphasis within the team, "discipline, accountability, servant leadership (Bison Pride), making sure your teammates needs are met prior to your needs." He also stated, "you have to be not only physically tough, but there is a level of mental toughness." It was explained that these values are more about the how and why, as opposed to a focus on metrics and stats. Having clear processes and values, that explains how and why the program operates, provides clarity for members. The Coach believed that this process allows the team to be competitive week in and week out. He emphasized that players are challenged to live out these values not just in the context of football, but in academic settings and everyday life. For values to fully permeate the program, they must encompass all aspects of the players' lives, not just in the football world.

The Receivers Coach and the Offensive Coordinator defined a set of values that aligned with those of the Athletics Director and Head Coach. The values described by these individuals' included excellence, toughness, character, discipline, and accountability. Two quotations highlight the importance of the values. The Receivers Coach stated:

It's still being physical and being tough. It's just more about the team than any individual.

Those are the things that I've seen from afar. The last thing I will say is just from being

here not even a semester yet is that there's a pride. I don't know if that's necessarily a

core value, but there's a pride and there's a standard of excellence that people are held to.

The Offensive Coordinator expanded upon this idea by stating:

It's all about the program, it's all about the team and there's no one individual that makes

the team. Just the sense of buy in and pride. You know, in my words, I would say all that

is the people. It's the right people in the program. It's through our process of selecting and

recruiting whether it be coaches, players, people that are associated with the program,

that fit NDSU in the recruiting process, it's not finding a five-star, a four-star, but it's just

finding the right people in the program.

Values are only as good as the people who live out the values. Finding the right people is a key

component of the success of the program. It does not matter if a player is the best athlete, if they

will not live out the values and put the team first, they will struggle to contribute to the success

of the program. Having a clear set of values provides parameters to determine who will find

success in the program and who will not. Team members and coaches that live these values

daily allow the Containers to unite the team and the values to influence all participants.

Finally, the players shared the idea of family, commitment, effort, and humility as core

values. The senior player did an excellent job of describing the importance of being selfless. He

described a book study that leaders in the program engaged in on the All Blacks rugby team

(Kerr, 2013).   The theme of the book was being different. A core theme of the book was

sweeping sheds (Kerr, 2013). In describing this theme, he said:

There's no job too small that your players can't be doing it. The example the book used

was after every game, no matter who their top player was in the locker room, everyone

was picking up tape and sweeping. Just having that servant leader mindset.

This aligns with a theme that the program is the spotlight not any individual. At some point, all

players will be called upon to help the team. Everyone needs to be humble enough to complete

even the most mundane task. They also need the humility to help players competing against

them for playing time. At some point the team will need to rely on all members and the team

only gets better if all members are developed. This highlights the theme of selflessness and

servant leadership very well.

The Head Coach described Bison Pride as making sure the needs of teammates are met

and provided for prior to individual needs. Selflessness, work ethic, accountability, and

character are all part of Bison Pride. The Head Coach explained that people who are disciplined,

and have Bison Pride, allow the values to permeate every level of their being. The values that

define Bison football require building relationships with your teammates so you can know and

meet their needs. All participants articulated a consistent vision of Bison Pride and how it has

provided a solid foundation for success.

Community

The final container that unites the Bison football program is the community of Fargo.

Located in the Upper Midwest and the largest community in North Dakota. There are no

professional sports programs in North Dakota, so the Bison are the de facto professional team for

their community. The connection with the community of Fargo emerged as a key unifying factor

for the program. There are high expectations on the football program, but there are also high

levels of support from the community. The expectations and support are key elements of the

program's success.

The Athletics Director described the following scenario when discussing high community

expectations of the program:

> Our football coach will be at the grocery store in the summer and he'll bump into fans and
>
> they'll say, I already bought my tickets to the national championship game. We haven't
>
> played a game yet. We haven't had a practice. That just goes to show that's the
>
> expectation of the program.

The fans expect that the program will be in the National Championship. The size of the

community means that there will be many opportunities for the coaches and players to interact

with the fans. These expectations create pressure to ensure the right individuals are in the

program to sustain success. Being successful in this type of environment takes a different type

of person according to the Athletics Director. He stated this requires the right kids and coaches

in terms of character. In talking about the community pressure, the Athletics Director said, "we

are not going to take a chance on a kid that doesn't fit the parameters of our program." This

shows the influence the community has on the program. While the community provides

pressure, it also provides significant support. The Athletics Director explained the athletic

department raises seventy-five percent of their annual budget. To be successful the program

needs funds to support facilities, recruiting, and coaches. The Athletics Director believes the fan

base understands this aspect. When speaking of the fans' financial support he said, "They

understand the resource demands and they support us really well financially". The facilities the

program has been able to support are a direct result of the community support they receive.

The Head Coach further expanded on the importance of the community as a key unifying factor for the Bison as expressed below:

> Our fans are part of the program. The venue that we play at here, the Fargo Dome, on any given Saturday is one of the greatest home field advantages in college football. From a ruckus volume. I tell recruits who've never been here for a game, it's like a rock concert. Then there's kickoff and you're like, what just happened? It went from pyrotechnics, lights off, strobe lights, then kickoff and it's loud, and they're very passionate. They want success. They expect success. That drives you as a football coach to make sure that you can hit those standards and expectations of a community.

The pressure of the community fosters a drive in the Coach to meet the community's expectations. The community establishes a bar for the program to strive towards. They play a key role in the values that unite the Bison. The coach described community demands for appropriate decision making from players and community desire for the program to give back. The program gave over 1000 hours of volunteer service over the 2022-23 school year. The Head Coach closed his comments by confirming the mutual benefit of the relationship with Fargo. He described, "look at the facilities we've been able to build, we are in the final phases of completing a $54 million indoor facility that was privately funded from alumni, fans, supporters because we're hopefully doing the right things in all areas."

The players expanded on the idea that the community of Fargo was a unifying influence within the program. The senior from the focus group described that the Bison are the biggest show in Fargo and people notice team members because of this fact. He uses player experiences to describe this, "you know, you walk downtown, people say, hey, good game. The way the community surrounds us, I think that makes it special". People want to be noticed and a unique

aspect of the community is people of Fargo care about the program and will express this care for the team. The freshman described the community as very tight knit. They also acknowledge that the closeness of the community comes with pressure. In describing the community, they stated, "They are our biggest supporter and then when we lose some games to South Dakota State University, they are our biggest critics. Obviously, you must take the good with the bad." This quotation highlights the pressure that comes with a highly invested community. The community expects to win National Championships and players to play at the highest level. This boundary has clearly created conditions that push the Bison to strive for excellence.

Differences (D)

Containers unite a system and define boundaries of the system. Differences within a system create the opportunity for movement and change. When many Differences are present, chaos and incoherence ensue. When no Differences are present, the system becomes stagnant as there is no need for change. The key Differences that exist in the Bison football system are expectations and recruiting philosophy. They have created friction and opportunities for movement within the program that contribute to its sustained success and have pushed the Bison to adapt and prevent stagnation. They exist in balance with one another, and this has allowed the program to sustain success over thirteen years.

Expectations

The community exists as a Container for Bison Football. The expectations of the community serve as a Difference that pushes the Bison toward change. Differences and Containers interact with one another to determine how fast a system will adapt and change. In FCS football, change is a constant reality and NDSU has faced significant changes over the last thirteen years but has maintained success. The expectations of the community place pressure on

the program to meet expectations. In turn, these expectations influence the decisions and actions of the football program.

The Athletics Director believes that it is harder to stay on top than it is to get to the top. The ability to maintain success requires continual investment. Fan expectations are incredibly high in Fargo and influence coaching decisions, recruiting decisions, and resource allocation. In describing the process of selecting a new head coach, the Athletics Director said, "having somebody who can lead our program, understands the expectations, and can deal with the pressure is essential." The coach needs to be able to handle the pressure of expectations and deliver. This is a key example of how the expectations influence the decisions of the Bison. The pressure to expand the gap between NDSU and their competitors is another key component of the Bison success. The program has leveraged to expectations of the fans to gain financial support. Community financial support is used to upgrade facilities and recruit key players. The Athletics Director describes:

> We're very much a believer in providing resources to be successful. Providing resources to our coaches to be able to go out and recruit young men who are going to represent our program in a really good way.

The pressure from the fans creates the opportunity to access resources that allow the Bison to recruit players who align with the values of the program. The pressure pushes the program to find funds to build facilities that allow them to develop the athletes within the program.

In the words of the Head Coach, "the fans expect success and that drives you as a football coach to make sure you can hit those standards." Community expectations have influenced the team to be deliberate in ensuring athletes in the program understand the high expectations. The team is deliberate in assisting players to understand those expectations do not end after the

National Championship. The expectations exist all year in every aspect of the players' lives.

This influences the Head Coach's recruiting philosophy. In discussing recruiting, he explains,

"we are going to place a heavy emphasis on character." When the team looks at character, they

look at it holistically, in all aspects of the players, not just sports. Their involvement in school,

community, the team, church and other areas is examined. The program believes all these lenses

tell a story about a potential recruit. The heavy emphasis on character, is certainly connected to

expectations of the community.

When describing recruiting, assistant coaches touched on factors that influence who they

recruit. The Offensive Coordinator described a need for players who "want to help move the

team forward and low ego guys." These values align with the expectations the community puts

on the program. Selfless players have low egos and strive to move the team ahead rather than act

in their self-interest. The Receivers Coach described the importance of players that want to be

developed and have tools that can be shaped. If players are unwilling to be developed, they will

be unlikely to meet the expectations of the community and program. The Offensive Coordinator

described the importance of talking to coaches, counselors, and people within the community to

get a holistic image of an athlete. If there were no expectations from the community, there

would be less pressure to focus these traits. The pressure of the community necessitates vetting

players to ensure they align with the program and community.

The senior player described the fan base as a double-edged sword. In describing the

dynamics between the community and team he stated:

We have seasons like last year, where we lose three games, play in the national

championship and our fans think we're terrible. You know how many fan bases in the

country would die to have a team go 12 and 3? That's like unheard of for some teams and

our fan base is kind of like that's a bad year.

This quotation highlights the pressure players feel from the community. The freshman player

agreed with the above statement by expressing, "That's well said." They went on to discuss the

importance of accountability after this comment. The freshman said, "Everybody holds each

other accountable". This applies to practice, the weight room, and the classroom. Everyone

holds one another to a high standard within the program. This accountability exists in

conjunction with the community expectations. The players are accountable to the community

and the program relies on the community for key support. The senior described the concept of

followership when discussing accountability. He stated, "You have got to have good followers

as much as you have good leaders, people forget how important it is to have people that can

follow". Players that can follow leaders well, listen to their message, and apply it will be able to

develop and meet the expectations of the community.

Recruiting Philosophy

The Bison are a developmental program. This means they bring in athletes that will be

developed over a five-year period with the program. North Dakota State strives to bring in

recruits who will represent the program in a very positive way.   The Athletics Director

expressed, "when our coaches go out and recruit, it's not purely just about talent, it's about

character and being part of the team." The players the Bison bring in must be selfless leaders

with a strong work ethic. These traits are key if they wish to develop athletes into future Bison.

Recruiting, for the Bison, is not about casting a wide net but casting an accurate net. The

Head Coach said the following regarding recruiting:

> We don't offer a lot of kids. College football has become a world of casting a huge net.
>
> Well, if I cast a big net, I can't do all these little things, because I don't have the time. We
>
> try to cast an accurate net. You know, we go for what we want rather than volume and
>
> that has enabled us to create great relationships as well.

This is a Difference that creates the opportunity for change within the program. As the coach stated, many programs cast a wide net. In doing so, they are unable to focus on the details of the individuals they bring into the program. Casting an accurate net, allows the Bison to focus on what they desire in an athlete and build a relationship with the athlete to determine if they align with Bison Football. The Coach focuses on four traits with recruits: character, intelligence, toughness, and athleticism. The program heavily emphasizes the first three traits. As highlighted in this statement:

> We can take a young man who might be 1/10 of a second slower, he might be half inch
>
> shorter, but because he has great character, great football savviness, football IQ, and he's
>
> resilient, he's tough or he's intrinsically motivated, he's going to make up for the some of
>
> the things that he might lack in length and speed.

Casting a wide net would be a hinderance to looking at player character, football savviness, and toughness.

The time invested in recruits, becomes an important way to determine who has the traits to become a Bison. The Head Coach describes the importance of the time to build relationships established by casting an accurate net:

> One of the things that we do at great detail, anytime we bring a recruit on campus, is a
>
> sit-down meeting with a position coach or a coordinator. We will talk ball. Teach us your
>
> number one coverage that you played in high school. Talk to me about you're block

reaction. Then we try to teach them a little bit of what we do. The next time they come

back, we try to start talking about the same concept that we taught the first time and see

what their retention is. Did they pay attention? Are they listening or hearing? And you

know, being an educator, you probably know the difference. There's a huge one. The

intent is basically the difference, you know intentionality.

It takes intentionality to be a Bison. The program is intentional in who they recruit and how they

recruit. This is different from many programs who focus on casting a wide net for the best

athlete. North Dakota State looks for great athletes, but they prioritize character and

intentionality. This key difference presents as a significant factor in their success as it allows

them to identify who can be developed.

Assistant Coaches aligned with the Head Coach's belief on recruiting. The Receivers

Coach stated, "Can we build him into something?" when speaking of recruiting. The program

wants players they can develop that possess well-rounded skills to support them in their

development.   The Offensive Coordinator described the need for low ego guys coming to win

championships, not for individual achievement. This requires high-capacity individuals.

Building relationships and getting to know recruits is a key component of determining their

capacity. When describing the recruiting process, the Offensive Coordinator expressed "we are

doing research on finding the next right Bison."   A second quotation describes the process in an

excellent way, "It's getting the right people on the bus and that comes down to having a level of

trust within the program."   It takes a level of trust of the program's process to recruit in a

different way. The Bison recruiting process is a key difference that has influenced their success.

Exchanges

Transforming Exchanges are transfers of information or energy that binds the various parts of an organization together. Exchanges of information, material, and energy play a significant role in creating cohesion within the system. For the North Dakota State Bison, the Transforming Exchanges that guide the interactions between the Containers and Differences in the program, are player leadership and the process orientation of the program. The Bison have created a culture of players empowered to coach and lead fellow players. Flattening of the leadership structure has created the opportunity for more feedback within the organization, which presents more opportunities for the identity and values to permeate throughout the organization. The Bison are a process-oriented football program. They focus on the how's and why's, rather than numbers on the scoreboard. Two processes within the program consistently arose as significant components of Bison success. The weight room and double rep practice structure are those processes. Player leadership and the process orientation of the team have contributed in a significant way to the sustained success of the Bison.

Player Leadership

A story shared, by the Athletics Director, about a football conference at a major FBS school in the Southeastern States highlights a powerful aspect of Bison success. When talking about structures that have been put in place to create opportunities to support core Bison values, the Athletics Director shared the following story:

> When our previous Head Coach was here, he attended a clinic at a major FBS school in the Southeastern States. This was probably one of the Head Coach's first years at the FBS school. Our Coach was a keynote speaker. The FBS Coach asked our Coach what he saw after watching practice. Our Coach said, well, what I saw is anytime a player

would mess up, the coaches are sprinting over there to correct them. The FBS coach responded, let me guess, at your place the players are correcting them. Our Coach responds, yeah. The FBS coach states that's why you have a championship program. That's where we need to get, where players are so invested in the program athletically, socially, from a character standpoint, that they're driving the accountability as much as the coaches.

One Exchange that differentiates the Bison is their upper classmen educate young players on what it means to be a Bison. Not just how they play on the field, how team members carry themselves, and how to approach life. This applies to coaches too. The Athletics Director describes the process:

We've always had Head Coaches in the program that have been here before. So those coaches understand. They educate the new coaches on what it means to be a Bison. Your responsibilities on campus, your responsibilities within departments, your responsibilities within the community to give back.

This empowered form of leadership places the responsibility of maintaining the identity and values of the program on all members. This theme was consistent throughout all interviews.

New coaches often express, after being at North Dakota State for a few months that things are different here. This was the experience of the new Receivers Coach. He described his experience seeing these interactions play out with players:

Once you're in it, there's just so much pride in the program. There's weight behind what the words are saying, because those older guys, they've had success. So, when they're talking to the younger guys, hey, man, this is the way to do it. This is how this is, this is

how we've been successful in the past. There's just so much weight to that and it's really

effective.

This coach's experience highlights the power of seeing players coaching one another and sharing

their experiences that have led to past success for the program. By empowering this process, it

allows new members of the program to really learn what it takes to be successful and learn from

those who have experienced the highest levels of success.

The Offensive Coordinator expanded on this idea when talking about giving the players

freedom to correct their teammates. He highlighted the importance of coaches giving them the

tools and putting them in the best position to be successful. As a former player and current

coach with the program, he shared valuable insight from both lenses. This quotation highlights

the power of empowered player leadership:

At the end of the day, it's the players who play and they need to have a level of trust in

the guy next to them. They're going to take the ownership to correct whatever they see, if

they see something they don't like, they're going to confront and demand excellence out

of their teammate. It's something that's just been passed on from the time that I was a

player. It's probably existed for years before that.

Empowered player leadership allows players to truly take ownership within the team and support

one another in striving toward the Bison standard.

The Head Coach shared that coaches give players the green light to coach one another.

He believes that NDSU is a player led program, which means having investment in your

teammates is okay. Players are encouraged to coach, so they do not feel handcuffed by a culture

where only coaches coach. He described the power of having peers coach one another with the following statement:

> When someone who is on the same level as you pours into you, what does that do to your psyche? What does that do to your confidence that person A, B, and C sees value in me and now they want me to be even better. I think that's all part of Bison Pride, making sure that your teammates needs and deficiencies are met before yours.

When players buy into the Bison program, they experience a culture that rallies around them and supports them in becoming the best individual they can. They experience a culture that puts the team before individual desires and a team that cares enough to invest in every member. At North Dakota State, they appreciate everyone's efforts, and they appreciate consistency. The program is the spotlight and players are empowered to highlight this message.

The players shared in this experience. The senior player, with six years' experience in the program, highlighted that this was the way the program ran when he was young. He stated:

> This is the way it was when I was a freshman. Now, as a senior, I need to pour back into the freshman and help them out. Then just from a number standpoint too, like we only have, two coaches for 18 people on the defensive line. If you add in juniors and seniors, now you have like 10 coaches for 18 people.

There is a legacy within the program that empowers players to follow the example of previous players. Veterans of the program have a significant wealth of knowledge to share with their teammates. The freshman player expanded on the importance of learning from veteran players. He said:

Young guys have to pay attention. These guys (veteran players) have been doing it for

years and there's a lot to learn and build from. For example, when we're doing special

teams drills or something and you don't do the drill necessarily, right, a coach might say

something, but right when you get back in line a veteran is going to coach you on it.

Players are receiving more coaching which really helps young player development. In flattening

the leadership structure, the identity of the Bison and the values the program seeks to uphold are

transmitted through the players. Their experience serves as a powerful exchange for instilling

identity and values.

The Process

The Bison are a process-oriented football program. They are more concerned with how

and why they do things than achieving individual results. This example presented itself in the

form of two processes within the program. The double rep practice structure and the strength

coach using the weight room to instill and reinforce Bison culture and values. The importance of

being a process-oriented team was discussed by the Head Coach. He described the process in the

following quotation:

It's not in the weight room for us, as in the demonstration of strength, it's a process to

improve your ability as a football player. Going back to that process versus result

philosophy, I think more and more people and more and more teams are driving

themselves thinking that results are what wins games. The players have to believe in the

process, because when you're a process-oriented team, you're always prepared for

situational football. This happens, then this needs to be the reaction to it. If we're in the

red zone, how are we going to respond? We get a takeaway, how are we going to

respond? You know when you're just result oriented, it's either good or bad. We can out

prepare adversity by being a process-oriented football team.

When players experience and understand the process, they have the skills to adapt, change, and

respond to adversity. The Bison have established a process that develops the ability to adapt in

their players.   This ability presents as a key to their sustained success. The process orientation

of the team is a vital way that information and values permeate the organization.

The double rep practice structure is a process the team uses to maximize player reps. The

Offensive Coordinator describes it below:

When double rep practice structure is on, you have two practices going on at once. The

team is split in half. The coaching staff is split in half. You've got one group doing a

whole script of plays. You have a whole other group on a different field or different end

of the field that's doing the same script to plays and you're in there physically doing it.

You're not going to come to NDSU a true freshman and just be told, hey, make sure

you're watching these guys operate. You're in the drill physically doing it. You learn best

by doing it.

This process allows players the opportunity to experience game situations. The Offensive

Coordinator states clearly, players learn best by doing. If they don't have the opportunity to

experience the game, they will not improve. The Receivers Coach supported this idea with the

following quote:

When you're double repping, and basically have a young guy's practice going on one end

and a veteran practice going on the other end, some guys are taking 20 reps in a row.

That's a lot of reps to take in a team setting. Everybody's moving, moving around,

getting a ton of reps. That's just different and you have to be wired different to practice

that way but it's the expectation.

The structure of practice creates the opportunity for interactions that enforce expectations. This

process translates into games situations by providing situational experience to as many players as

possible. The Head Coach says that in a five-minute period, eighty-five percent of the team has

some sort of learning experience. How the team prepares is related to how they execute. The

double rep structure allows them to learn to react and simultaneously build their conditioning and

toughness.

The other key process that arose throughout the interviews was the importance of the

strength coach and weight room in establishing Bison Pride. The Athletics Director discussed

how the program develops players over the course of their time with the program. A key piece

of their development is in the weight room with their strength coach. The Head Coach explained

that players are with their strength coach almost 300 days per year. The messaging,

expectations, and standard of the weight room are used to create pride in the program and

uncomfortableness that players need to grow. The weight room is a place where bodies of

players are transformed into elite Division I football athletes. The Offensive Coordinator

described the role of the strength coach and weight room:

> He's not just coaching a squat, bench press, he's also coaching the discipline, the
>
> accountability, the sense of Bison Pride, what it means to be a great teammate, attention
>
> to detail, if you're told to touch a line, you're going to touch a line. You're going to be
>
> taught how to finish. That process has helped us instill and continue to instill daily what
>
> it means to be a successful person and successful Bison Football player.

The weight room is a non-verbal exchange of values and culture that has been vital in developing

Bison athletes. The Receivers Coach expanded this statement by describing the players holding

each other to a high leadership standard and developing the ability to coach one another. The

freshman player stated, "even in the weight room we're held to such high standards and each

player supports each other to hold high standards." The weight room is a process that allows the

players to grow and improve while entrenching Bison Pride.

Conclusion

The findings of this case study established key themes that influenced the sustained

success of the North Dakota State Bison Football Program. The themes were grouped into

Containers (C), Differences (D), Exchanges (E). The key containers that united the Bison

program were the identity, values, and community. The identity served as a rigid factor in

defining what it means to be a Bison and served as a tool to evaluate who will last with the

program and who will not last. The values were hard work, selflessness, character, and

toughness. These factors define the daily efforts of success in the Bison program. Fargo's small

size defined the program as the Bison are the professional team for the market. The small size

had strong implications for the recruiting process of the Bison. The differences that create

opportunity for change were expectations and recruiting philosophy. Fargo places high

expectations for success inside and outside of football for Bison members. The values and

identity of the program require that they cast an accurate net when recruiting players to ensure

players will fit with the program. Exchanges that allow Containers and Differences to interact

with one another were player leadership and the process. The program places high emphasis on

players supporting players in their development and growth. NDSU has created a clear process

to ensure players are properly developed, coached, and willing to align with Bison values. Chapter five will present conclusions to the study and propose literature gaps and next steps.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the unparalleled success of the North Dakota State Bison Football Program over the last twelve years. During this time, the Bison defied great odds in winning nine out of a potential of twelve National Championships at the Football Championship Subdivision level. The program compiled a record of 161 wins with only 15 losses. In the playoffs they earned a record of 42 wins and 4 losses, only losing to eventual National Champions. No team has sustained a greater run of success in the history of the Football Championship Subdivision. What makes this achievement more prominent is that it was achieved in an environment of consistent change. During this run, the program had three separate head coaches, five different quarterbacks, and yearly turnover of graduating players. This unprecedented success, in a complex and changing environment, provided a compelling case to study through the lens of Complexity Leadership Theory. Complexity causes the traditional relationship of cause and effect to be more obscure and potentially change rapidly (Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002). College football teams experience tremendous complexity through the nature of the game, the recruiting process, changes to personnel (coaches and players), and the physical nature of the game (injuries). Teams that are successful in navigating these issues provide valuable insight into navigating complex adaptive environments to build sustained success. The Bison have navigated complexity better than any football program in FCS history. For this reason, they made a compelling case to study and grow the current literature on organizational leadership for sustained success.

Complexity Leadership Theory views leadership as having three components: operational, entrepreneurial, and enabling leadership (Backlander, 2018). Operational authority is based upon power and position and comes with an ability to make top-down decisions that influence the organization. Entrepreneurial leadership deals with the explorative process of creating new knowledge, skills, and approaches. Enabling leadership seeks to balance operational and entrepreneurial leadership with the goal of creating good conditions for adaption in a complex environment (Backlander, 2018). Enabling leadership involves fostering interactions and interdependency to build adaptive tension that leads to change. Enabling leadership is about creating agile leaders and organizations that are responsive to change. This study examined the enabling leadership practices of the Bison through the framework of Eoyang's (2001) Container, Differences, and Transformational Exchanges (CDE) model.

The CDE model of complexity leadership was used as a foundational lens to view the data of this study. Containers are unifying forces that hold the system together and unite participants. Differences represent distinctions that create the potential for movement or change in response to complexity. Transforming Exchanges are transfers of information, energy, or material between members that bind the parts of an organization together into a whole. Chelladurai's (1978) Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership served as a secondary framework with which to view the results of this study. Eoyang (2002) found that interventions or practices that change conditions within a complex environment change the coherence of the system. If these changes increase the coherence of the organization, they will also increase the effectiveness of the organization (Eoyang, 2002). The model uses Containers, Differences, and Exchanges to classify factors that influence a system towards coherence. Chelladuarai (1978) classified five dimensions of leadership behaviour in sport: Training Behaviour, Democratic

Behaviour, Autocratic Behaviour, Social Support, and Rewarding Behaviour. These perspectives provided the theoretical framework for the study.

This qualitative case study examined an American sports team from a Canadian perspective and is one of the few studies to examine sports organizational culture through the lens of complexity theory. The study used these perspectives to understand coaching behaviours, leadership practices, and strategies that influenced how the Bison Football system organized to sustain success. The study used interviews with the Athletics Director and Head Coach and focus group discussions with assistant coaches and players within the program. Each focus group had a veteran coach and player as well as a newer coach and player to provide a breadth of perspectives.

The unparalleled success of the North Dakota State Bison Football Program was examined. Complexity Leadership Theory was used to examine the values, strategies, and structures the contributed to the sustained success of the program over a twelve-year period. Changes in personnel, injuries to players, the recruiting process, and expectations all represent areas of complexity the Bison overcame to sustain success. This study provided significant insights into the factors the unified the team, distinctions that moved the program towards success, and interactions that created coherence for the team.

Research Questions

This study sought to understand the organizational factors that contributed to the sustained success of North Dakota State University Football. Three questions guided the research. The questions used to ascertain the Bison's success were:

1.   What unifiers and values have contributed to and defined the unprecedented success of the Bison dynasty?

2.   How did these unifiers and values overcome the tremendous challenges of sustaining

success at the FCS level?

3.   What strategies were used to create the opportunity for interactions that develop shared

values to unify diverse elements of the program towards a common goal?

The following sections summarize how the data collected from the study participants provided

insight into possible answers to the research questions.

Unifiers and Values defining Bison Dynasty Success

The first question this research sought to understand was the unifying factors and values

that defined North Dakota States success. Three factors emerged when answering the question

of unifiers and values within the Bison football program. The three factors were identity, Bison

Pride (values), and the community of Fargo, North Dakota. All serve as significant defining and

unifying forces that created a culture capable of overcoming significant odds to sustain success.

Identity, Bison Pride, and the community of Fargo will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Identity

North Dakota State has a clear identity that defines the football program. This identity

defines the style of play, type of player, and the approach the team takes to develop members for

success. This identity serves as a tool coaches, players, and university administration use to vet

individuals. It will not be compromised. People either adhere to the identity or do not last with

the program. The following quote from the Athletics Director highlights this:

We're a program that focuses on the trenches, good offensive and defensive line play.

We play good defense and we run the ball primarily. For us to bring in somebody who

will run the spread offense, that is not who we are.

Consistent with Chelladurai's (1978) study, the identity of the Bison is a factor that the program uses to set itself apart. Players and coaches from the program adhere to the identity, as it will not be adapted. In multiple interviews and focus groups, it was stated that players and coaches who do not align with the team's identity will not last with the program. This rigid identity plays a key role in determining who will be and who will not be a member of the Bison. The Athletics Director shared that all head coaches during NDSU's championship dynasty previously served as assistant coaches with the program prior to becoming the Head Coach. The purpose being the program can ensure coaches maintain continuity within the program identity. Programs with a history of success and strong financial resources, who can recruit the right coach have the highest likelihood of sustained success (Adler et al., 2012; Dronyk-Trosper & Stitzel, 2017). The identity of Bison football has defined a brand of football that contributes to success on the field, in recruiting, and with fundraising. Football players at the Division I level show high levels of satisfaction with autocratic coaching behaviour (Reinke, 2002; Sorenson, 2018; Williams, 2010). Maintaining a firm and uncompromised identity has allowed the Bison to overcome the challenge of sustained success.

The right coach is a key component of maintaining success in any sport. Significant pressure to maintain success, financial resources, recruit the right players and coaches, and meet the expectations of the community is placed on the head coach. It is essential the program finds a coach who can face these challenges. In North Dakota, the Bison Head Coach is one of the most recognizable people in the state. For this reason, the Bison have hired coaches from within the program. This ensures the head coach knows the identity, understands community pressure, can maintain continuity, and expand the success of the program. This approach is significant in their success.

Bison Pride (Values)

The second defining unifier in the case study was Bison Pride. It represents the values that unite members of the program and community. These values can vary from season-to-season; however, in this study a common set of values emerged. Toughness, selflessness, accountability, character, leadership, and work ethic were common traits shared when talking when discussing the programs values. The Head Coach emphasized, "discipline, accountability, servant leadership, making sure your teammates needs are met prior to your needs" as key values. Football requires full trust in all members of the team to succeed. Selflessness, putting the teams needs ahead of one's own, has fostered a culture of trust. Every player on the team plays a role in growing the Bison culture of success. Selfless players, willing to sacrifice for the good of the team, have built trust required to achieve unprecedented success.   Aligning with research on sport leadership in the literature (Biener, 2020; Maitland, A., Hills, L., Rhind, D., 2015; Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018).

Family atmosphere and commitment to the pursuit of excellence are strongly connected to successful leadership practices (Biener, 2020; Maitland, A., Hills, L., Rhind, D., 2015; Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Bison Pride supports the team in building an atmosphere that strives for excellence and establishes a family-like community. Athletes in the program care enough to correct and hold one another to account. Through accountability, toughness and resilience is developed in the athletes. This practice has built a highly collaborative environment with players humble enough to accept feedback necessary for growth. Collaboration is a key component of high-level performance (Biener, 2020). Vulnerability and trust are key components of building a collaborative family-like atmosphere (Biener, 2020).   The values of Bison Pride serve as a key component that supports the elite performance at North Dakota State. Through conscious

understanding of the values by all members of the team, they serve as a strong and positive influence.

Community of Fargo

The community of Fargo, North Dakota serves as a final unifier. Fargo provides a unique environment to support Bison football given its geography and size. It is a smaller urban centre, in a state with a lower population. The community has no professional football team. Therefore, the residents of Fargo are very committed to cheering for the Bison. The geographic region defines individuals recruited into the program. Given the community size, as well as the division NDSU plays in, they rarely get elite recruits. Heavy focus is placed on recruiting players from with the Upper Midwest region that show traits conducive to development into elite football players. The community rallies around the program and the fans are some of the most passionate in all of college football. The Head Coach described the fans' role in the program:

> Our fans are part of the program. The venue that we play at here, the Fargo Dome, on any given Saturday is one of the greatest home field advantages in college football. They want success. They expect success. That drives you as a football coach to make sure that you can hit those standards and expectations.

There is limited research on the role of a community in supporting athletics. Fargo is a significant influence in terms of financial support and their influence on the values of the organization. Financial resources define an organization's ability to succeed. The ability to hire the best coaches, build necessary facilities, and support student athlete experiences with proper resources is key to a successful team (Christian, 2017, p.110). The community has supported the program financially allowing the program to hire the right coaches, build the appropriate facilities, and obtain the resources required to support success. Without these financial

resources, the ability of the program to develop elite Division I athletes would be hindered. The community is a vital unifier for North Dakota State Football.

How Unifiers and Values Overcame the Challenge of Sustaining Success

This study sought to understand how the unifiers and values that defined North Dakota State overcame the challenge of sustaining success. It is very challenging to build a championship football program in the Football Championship Subdivision. Maintaining success for over a decade is even more challenging. Obstacles to overcome include: teams targeting the program when they play, maintaining and growing resources, continually finding recruits who fit the program, and staffing coaches who will maintain success.   These challenges, or tensions, create the opportunity for movement, growth, and change. Challenges push teams to grow. Too many will create chaos and too few will create stagnation. Two elements emerged in this study that supported the Unifiers and Values in overcoming the challenge of sustaining success. High expectations placed on the Bison create a standard all members of the program strive to achieve. The Bison's recruiting philosophy is a key aspect that assists the program finding the right individuals. Both elements are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Expectations

High expectations are placed on the Bison football program. They come from the community, the administration and the coaches. The senior defensive player with the Bison described these expectations:

> We have a season like last year, where we lose three games, play in the national championship and our fans think we're terrible. You know how many fan bases in the country would die to have a team go 12 and 3? That's unheard of for some teams and our fan base is kind of like that's a bad year.

Fans demand excellence on the field and in the community. These expectations create tension, pushing the team to strive to meet these expectations.   In Complexity Leadership Theory, there are three components of leadership: operational, entrepreneurial, and enabling (Backlander, 2018). Enabling leadership seeks to create positive conditions for adaptation (Backlander, 2018). This component fosters interactions and interdependency to build adaptive tension that leads to change. The community of Fargo serves as an enabling leader in supporting Bison football success. Expectations from fans of the Bison put pressure on the program to perform on the field, support the community, and display high levels of leadership within the community. This tension, in the form of expectations, pushes the Bison to improve and grow.

In response to expectations, the Bison create high standards for their members. These standards apply in the classroom, weight room, and the field. It is not easy to be a Bison. Tremendous work and sacrifice are required to sustain success. There is no break from this process, it is on-going. The standards and expectations encompass all aspects of coaches' and players' lives. The Head Coach describes this process, "The same standard and expectations follow our kids when they go to the classroom, when they're in the community, when they go to the grocery store, or they go out to the pub". Wherever they go, they represent the program. In response to high expectations, the program has created standards that encompass all aspects of the players lives. The weight program and strength coach are key components of this strategy. The Head Coach described the importance of the strength program, "the standard that we have in that in that weight room, and our offseason conditioning program creates pride in the program. The pride creates buy in and the uncomfortableness that everyone needs to continue to grow." The teaching of the Bison Way, through the strength program, is a foundational element of building skills in players that allow the unifiers and values to sustain success.

Recruiting

The Bison define themselves as a developmental football program. Success is achieved through finding players who can be developed, into great players, over the course of four to five years. A developmental vision for the program defines their recruiting philosophy. Playing in a state that has a lower population, combined with competing in the Football Championship Subdivision means North Dakota State rarely recruits athletes that can perform at an elite level as freshman. Therefore, the program invests heavily in the development of their players. It starts with recruiting athletes that have modelled the values of Bison Pride throughout their lives. This means they need to find athletes who have modeled work ethic, consistency, leadership, and toughness in all aspects of their lives. As a result, the program casts an accurate net instead of a wide net when recruiting. Focusing their recruiting to fewer athletes allows coaches to build strong connections with potential recruits and discern if they can meet of the high demands placed on Bison members.

The Head Coach focuses on four traits with recruits: character, intelligence, toughness, and athleticism. A heavy emphasis is placed on the first three traits. Programs that build systems to effectively develop their athletes see the greatest success and growth in their program (Dronyk-Trosper & Stitzel, 2004). The most significant traits the program needs in recruits are character, intelligence, and toughness. Individuals who lack these traits will struggle to achieve the development required to meet the Bison standard. North Dakota State prioritizes these traits over athleticism. They believe firmly players with character, intelligence, and toughness can overcome small deficiencies in their athleticism. Players with these traits show the highest propensity to be developing into individuals who will meet the challenge and allow sustained success. A significant factor in rising to the challenge of sustained success is recruiting athletes

who show traits necessary to be developed. Data on development further states that structured

environments that provide clear expectations, mandate attendance at meetings and practice, and

provide structured training and instruction will see strong growth in their athletes (Williams,

2010).   The Bison's recruiting philosophy is the first step in determining who will allow the

program to thrive and grow.

Expectations drive the Bison to develop standards that apply to all members of the

program. The standards are applicable to all aspects of players lives and established in the

weight room, meetings, classroom, and practice. Finding athletes with the right traits to be

developed is essential to sustaining success. By concentrating on key values when recruiting

potential Bison, the program can maximize resources to ensure recruits align with the team.

These factors have allowed the unifiers and values of the Bison to build the most successful

Football Championship Subdivision program in history.

Interactions that Develop Shared Values and Unify the Bison

A key focus of this study was on the interactions that allow the values and unifiers to

create a united and cohesive team environment. Interactions bind parts of an organization into a

united whole (Eoyang, 2001). In football, it is essential that teams are united around a central

vision and set of goals to maintain high levels of success. Two interactions emerged as

significant aspects of North Dakota States sustained success: Empowered player leadership and

the Bison process.

Empowered Player Leadership

Football programs have many moving parts and require guidance and coaching.

Willenbrock (2009) found shared leadership allows wider dispersion and greater emergence of

leadership. It leads to greater maturity in athletes and creates a sustainable environment where

the guidance and coaching is shared throughout members. The Bison have empowered players

to take on vital roles coaching and supporting their peers. The Offensive Coordinator described

this:

> At the end of the day, it's the players who play and they need to have a level of trust in
>
> the guy next to them. They're going to take the ownership to correct whatever they see.
>
> If they see something they don't like, they're going to confront and demand excellence
>
> out of their teammate.

Within Chelladurai's (1978) Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership the program shows

high levels of Democratic Behaviour with on-field coaching practices. Empowerment of players

to lead has created breadth within the program. Breadth occurs when the desired culture is

present in all facets of the organization (Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). Informal and formal leaders'

model and reinforce values of North Dakota State, not just coaches. An environment has been

created where players share incredible amounts of knowledge, pushing all members toward real

improvement and success. The trust combined with knowledge sharing allows the team to

bridge varying experience levels and improve the performance of the whole team (Martin, 2019).

This support allows the unseen to be more visible and tangible (Backlander, 2018).   It builds

constructive dialogue that enables success (Backlander, 2018). The Bison have flattened the

leadership curve to allow members to receive more coaching. In turn, this creates significant

improvement as more players receive immediate and timely feedback. Through the interviews, it

was consistently stated that the Bison do things differently. One of the most significant ways the

program is different, is the high level of coaching and shared leadership displayed by members

of the organization.

Empower Player Leadership

The Bison are a process-oriented football program. The focus is on how and why things are done, as opposed to meeting statistical expectations.   The program is purposeful in all aspects and strategies they use to build skills in players and coaches. Enabling them to react and adapt better than any other program in Football Championship Subdivision history, when faced with challenging situations. Regarding the Bison process, the Head Coach stated:

> When you're a process-oriented team, you're always prepared for situational football. This happens, then this needs to be the reaction to it. If we're in the red zone, how are we going to respond? We get a takeaway, how are we going to respond? You know when you're just results oriented, it's either good or bad.

North Dakota State has built an elite culture by teaching values in a way that allows them to be embraced and expressed throughout the organization. The success comes from defining values together, introducing values early, having teammates teach values, and bringing core values to life (Biener, 2020; Maitland, A., Hills, L., Rhind, D., 2015; Cole, J., Martin, A., 2018). These values have been reinforced by practice structures, weight room processes, and book studies. Everything the Bison do is purposeful in orienting the team to success. They provide their players with opportunities to learn, lead, and grow through processes.

The double rep practice structure is a prime example of a process that allows growth. Approximately eighty-five percent of players get significant reps during double rep practices. This structure creates opportunities for most players to gain meaningful experience. During this time, players and coaches provide feedback to one another. Through this process of feedback, significant adaptation and growth occurs.   Being a process-oriented team serves as a powerful exchange of information, identity, and values. The Bison provide more opportunity for

meaningful experience and more feedback to their players. This is a significant difference from other programs and a process that has ensured the program overcomes significant odds to maintain success.

Empowered player leadership and deliberate processes have allowed North Dakota State to become the most successful Football Championship Subdivision team in history. Sharing the responsibility for accountability, coaching, and feedback ensures more players receive information they need to grow. Providing deliberate processes including, the strength program and double rep practices, creates the opportunity for athletes to live and experience what is required for success.

Implications

The Bison football program is one of the most successful programs in history. Their run of success and championships over the last thirteen years provided a rare and unique case to study. The snapshot of this unique moment in time has provided valuable insights into building sustainable leadership practices that build successful organizations. The implications for this study will be discussed in the following sections: Implications for Team Leadership, Implications for Educational Leadership, and Implications for Future Research.

Implications for Team Leadership

There are several implications for this study that are applicable to collegiate sports teams. Having a clear identity and strong values are necessary to build a strong culture. Identity and values should be supported by developing clear processes to provide experience for players, embracing challenges, and giving strong consideration to who becomes a member of the program.

Developing a clear team identity is a key responsibility of administration, coaches, and leadership. One of the key themes that emerged from all members of the Bison organization is they knew what it means to be a Bison. Having a foundational identity serves as a pillar of consistency and an ideal to strive towards as an organization. It is a clear focal point for all members of the organization. When the organization has a focal point clarity is created allowing members to focus on what is important, instead of extraneous distractions. A clear identity means that the organization cannot please or meet the needs of everyone. The identity establishes criteria for people inside and outside the organization to determine if they fit and can play a role within the organization. Identity is a foundational boundary in uniting a team to be successful.

Values play a significant role in determining the behaviours and actions of team members. Successful teams find ways for values to permeate the organization. This is achieved by involving all stakeholders in determining and modeling these values. It is one thing to state a set of values, it is an entirely different thing to live a set of values. Through the concept of Bison Pride, NDSU has empowered coaches and players to be involved in determining values of the organization. Values and identity need to have longevity to enact lasting change. Hiring coaches and leaders that understand values of a team is key to maintaining successful organizations. Coaches, past players, and leaders sharing how team values have led to success in their lives, on and off the field, is a powerful tool to achieve breath. Challenging team members to live out values and support others is essential to creating high adherence to team values.

Players need to experience game situations to be successful. These experiences on their own are not enough to build elite success. Players need to receive consistent and on-going coaching to allow for growth and adaptation of their abilities. Teams and coaches should be

strategic in planning practices to ensure that their players are getting reps that will help them develop into better athletes. This is particularly important in the first two years of university sport when players see the most growth. The opportunity for reps must be combined with immediate feedback. One positional coach cannot effectively provide feedback to all the players in their position group. Teams should empower players, particularly veteran players who know the system, to coach one another and support growth. Players that receive significant reps, as well as accurate and immediate coaching will be empowered to maximize their potential.

Tension from challenges should be embraced by teams, coaches, and players. Tension creates the potential for continued growth and success. Teams that embrace challenges and develop systems and process to overcome the challenges will better sustain success. Intentional processes that provide meaningful experiences will be leverage tension for growth. Being a process-oriented team helps players to be adaptable and overcome challenges. Processes within the team should focus on building skills and providing experiences to players relevant to their sport. They should not focus on meeting metrics. This applies in practice, the weightroom, academic classes, and how players conduct themselves daily. If teams take this approach, they will build skills that allow players to successfully respond to the challenges they face.

Consideration should be given to the process of determining who is invited to be a member of the team. Having a clear identity, values, and process for developing players is important for success. Teams that have the right people to develop have the potential to experience high levels of success. Using identity and values to cast an accurate net in recruiting athletes creates time to learn about the athletes recruited. It also allows the team to invest more resources into each athlete they recruit. Casting a wider net in recruiting gives a bigger pool but it also spreads resources thin. This can create challenges to properly vetting athletes. Learning

about an individual takes time and investment. If teams seek to be successful, this is an essential consideration.

Organization values and identity create a focal point for members to rally around. When these are supported with experience for members to develop, the embracing of challenges, and a proper process for vetting future members organizations best set themselves up for success.

Implications for Educational Leadership

The findings from this study can be applied to educational leadership. Implications for educators include establishing a clear identity and values, empowering educators to support and lead one another, focusing on the development of educators, and building processes to support development.

Educators work in complex environments where they face daily challenges. Leaders need to support educators by building structures that establish a clear identity and values. Once a clear identity with accompanying values are established, leaders need to live those values and strategically provide resources to ensure the values spread. This process must involve input from stakeholders within the organization. Once established, the identity and values, should serve as a guidepost in making decisions that affect educational institutions. Schools are complex environments that require effective leadership.   A clear identity will serve as a strong support when leaders make challenging decisions. It provides clarity to stakeholders on the ideals and goals of the organization. When an educational institution has an ideal to strive towards it gives purpose to the process used to achieve the ideal. Instructional practices, staffing, and all aspects of schools should be reflective of the core identity and values.

Values and effective processes, when connected, bring the identity of an organization to life. Many schools lack processes that support the establishment of consistent values. In the absence of these unifying factors, schools struggle to achieve a clear identity. Processes and values, divorced from one another, make it difficult to achieve an ideal identity. Values when properly established provide a road map to stronger schools. North Dakota State has been successful because they created an ideal identity, established values that support the team in achieving the ideal identity, and have developed processes that embed these values and allow them to permeate the organization. When describing the connection between values and processes, the Offensive Coordinator stated:

> The way we work in the weight room. The process in the weight room. We are not just coaching the squat or bench press, we are coaching discipline, accountability, what it means to be a great teammate, and attention to detail. The process has helped us instill what it means to be a successful person and Bison Football player.

The values, that allow the identity of North Dakota State to come to life, are supported by effective processes. The processes used by North Dakota state are deliberately designed to engrain the values of the organization in all members.

It is very easy for educators and educational leaders to exist in silos. One of the implications for educators from this study is the importance of empowering them to support and develop one another. Educational leaders often feel the pressure of being the sole coach and evaluator of their staff. This need not be the case. Schools are full of talented individuals with diverse skillsets to support learners. Consideration should be given to structures and practices that empower educators to coach and develop one another. Finding ways to support educators and stakeholders in sharing feedback is essential. North Dakota State emphasizes every team

member will be relied upon at some point. This is no different in schools. Educators,

administrators, parents, and students working together is an essential component for a successful

education system. Administrators would do well to emphasize and educate their communities on

the vital role they play within education and the importance of reliance and trust within the

school community. Relevant and timely feedback is a key component of trust, growth, and

change. Teachers have significant opportunities to improve at their craft daily. However,

feedback on their practices can be rare and inconsistent. Building opportunities for teachers to

observe, reflect, and coach one another creates the potential for significant growth and

improvement. Clear values and identity combined with effective feedback creates a strong

foundation for improvement.

An implication, specific to smaller institutions or communities, from this study is the

importance of being developmental. Smaller institutions and communities often do not have the

largest pools of applicants seeking employment within their district. Finding and developing the

right people in these situations is of the utmost importance for educational leaders. Leaders that

co-create and develop a clear identity and value set can use these tools to determine who will

best fit within their institution. Effective leaders will use the values to vet candidates and

determine who fits and will best support growth within the organization. Another implication of

this is that educational leaders need to have a strong system/program to develop their staff.

Structures and systems to support the development of teachers and instillation of values should

be given serious consideration. Leaders that build a developmental culture will best support

educators and learners in their context.

The final implication for educational leaders is the importance of being a process-

oriented school as opposed to a results-oriented school. Schools are full of diverse people and

diverse needs. Building in processes and structures to respond to these needs is key to success within educational institutions. If schools are solely results-oriented, it can lead to struggles in many aspects. Building processes and opportunities to build skills in students and staff will lead to sustained growth over time. Processes and supports provide opportunities to build skills and experiences that will lead to success. It is important that these processes align with the identity and values of the school. When the process is viewed as separate or distinct from the identity and values of an organization, it will be viewed as another initiative. Connecting the process to the ideal is essential for it to succeed. A developmental approach presents significant challenges to our current educational system, as achieving specific results is the focus of many aspects of the curriculum. Building the capacity to respond to diverse needs should be a key consideration of educational leaders.

Establishing a clear identity and values, empowering educators to support and lead one another, focusing on the development of educators, and building processes to support development contribute to building success in educational settings. Leaders who are deliberate in implementing these practices will create a strong foundation to develop members and see sustained success.

Implications for Further Research

This case study provides several implications for further research on values as drivers of sustained success. Research recommendations include replicating this study with teams that differ in characteristics from the Bison, replicating this study in small/rural school districts, and further examination of processes as a driver of sustained success.

This study could be expanded and replicated to include other athletic programs with differing characteristics from the NDSU Bison. Programs that have shown consistent levels of

sustained success across significant periods of time would be the recommendation for further study. This could include programs from Division I, Division II, and Division III schools. Schools with different geographic and historical contexts may yield divergent findings from this study. Programs that compete in lower or higher NCAA divisions may yield different results as the pool of athletes and availability of resources varies greatly between said programs. Upon replication, the data would be compared to pinpoint differences and similarities in the Containers, Differences, and Exchanges that drive organizational success. Comparative case studies could examine Division I, II, and III schools to determine similarities and differences between factors that sustain success at varying levels. Finally, a comparative case study between successful teams of differing sports could be conducted.

Further research could be applied to small/rural school districts using this study as a foundation. Smaller school districts are often composed of small communities where there are significant interactions between the community and the school. These school districts, due to a variety of factors including geography, often have smaller pools of applicants and will be less likely to get polished and fully developed educators applying to their district. Being able to recruit and effectively develop staff in these districts is an essential skill. This study could be used as a foundation to study the values, strategies, and structures that are used to sustain success within the field of education in small and rural settings.

The processes within the Bison football team played a significant role in the success of the organization. Their practice structure, recruiting strategy, and player empowerment to coach peers all represent significant structures and practices that allow values to permeate the organization and contribute to the sustained success of the program. Further research on

processes that contribute to the success of other organizations and teams would be an area of interest for further research.

Implications for further study include case studies of additional programs, comparative case studies, study of small school districts which replicate this study, and further examination of processes that lead to sustained success.

Limitations

Existing limitations hinder the generalization of this study to all football programs and organizations. The limitations of this study include: the researcher did not attend a game or practice, the researcher met with each participant only once, and one program was studied.

The researcher did not attend a game or practice as part of this study. Most of this study occurred during Covid which presented obstacles to the study. Travel and border crossing restrictions presented are examples. Another challenge is that the researcher maintained a family and work schedule that made travel to the location challenging and necessitated the study being conducted from a distance. Studying the program from a distance meant that the researcher was not immersed in the program. The opportunity to talk with fans, other students, and key community members would have allowed for more learning about the context of the program. It was important to set boundaries and delimit what was looked at in the study. This ensured that the data examined in the study was achievable given travel and time restraints.

The data from this study came from focus groups and interviews with key individuals who represent important groups within the Bison football program. Everyone was met with only once. More time to sit, follow, and talk with participants at different points during the season would contribute to a deeper understanding of how the Bison have been so successful. Observing times of uncertainty or challenge may have allowed a deeper understanding of the

Bison success. This study was limited to talking with key people after the season was over. Talking during the season may have changed the data. All these factors would contribute to a broader understanding of the program.

The final limitation of this study is that one football program was studied. The team has a unique geographic location that plays a significant role in its success and limits the generalizability to other programs. This study provides valuable information that organizations will find useful in applying to their individual contexts. It is important that organizations that have been able to overcome odds and sustain success be examined closely to determine factors that contribute to success.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the values and unifiers that have contributed to the sustained success of the North Dakota State Bison Football program. It is very rare for teams to maintain success for as long as North Dakota State. This study was inspired by the desire to understand the unique aspects that allowed for the unrivaled success of the program. Eoyang's (2001) CDE Model was used to clarify the Containers, Differences, and Exchanges that contributed to the organizations sustained success. Through interviews and focus groups Containers that unify the program, Differences that contribute to adaptation, and Exchanges that create coherence were determined.

Identity, Bison Pride, and the community of Fargo, North Dakota proved to be significant unifiers and values that contributed to the success of the program. The Bison football program knows who they are, their values, and understands the strong history of the program. The program shows a high level of self-awareness, from which they do not deviate. Clear values combined with a strong identity allow the program to not be distracted by external factors.

These values guide administration, coaches, and players in focusing their interactions and decisions on how and who will contribute to maintained success. The values being clearly defined and consistently communicated and understood throughout the program was a significant contributor to the sustained success of the team. Generations of Bison players have been shaped by the consistent identity and values.

The identity and values of the program allow coaches and players to create a singular focus that allows the team to overcome challenges. North Dakota State has established practices that are proven to create success and are rooted in their identity and values. Trusting these established processes is a key component to maintaining the challenge of sustained success. There is significant pressure to repeat as National Champions and opponents place a target on NDSU's back every year.

Clear values and identity allow the Bison to focus on individuals that can join the program, face the pressure of success, and grow the established culture. They do not get distracted by statistics or athleticism, both important considerations. Their identity and values create a strong self-awareness that allows them to understand the right person to become a Bison. Through self-awareness they have created a recruiting philosophy that allows the team to focus on finding the right recruits.

Empowering players to coach and rely on one another is key to the program's success. At North Dakota State University players are empowered through coach and peer modelling to support and hold one another accountable. All members are held accountable to the values and identity established by the team and the community. Players understand that every individual on their roster is essential to the success of the program.   In response to this, high value is placed on developing and training to be ready to contribute to the success of the team. One person cannot

coach and entire team and position group. Players see immense value in sharing their knowledge and experience with one another. Flattening of the coaching curve allows all members of the Bison to contribute to the development of student athletes in all aspects of their lives. This is a key unifying factor within this study. At North Dakota State, the needs of the team are greater than the needs of the individual. This perspective is actively lived by members and allows the program to maintain success.

The Bison have been deliberate in developing a process-oriented football team. Their process empowers players to focus on the purpose of what they are doing as opposed to meeting metrics. Through this, players build skills that support them in responding to challenging situations that arise within their sport and life. The process engrains the ability to effectively respond to various situations.   The Bison use this process build the cohesiveness of the team. The process is guided by their identity and values. The process builds young men into successful Bison, if they are willing to put in the work.

The Bison have built a strong identity, from which they do not deviate. Within their identity, they have established values that are firmly rooted in all members of the program. Their identity and values when combined with support from the community of Fargo create clear unifying factors within the program. Embracing high standards of the community and developing clear recruiting practices creates the opportunity for growth of all members. Finally, establishing clear processes and empowering player coaching and leadership has created conditions that allow the identity and values to create coherence within the Bison football program. The Bison have overcome significant odds over the past twelve years to become the most successful program in Football Championship Subdivision History. Without a clear identity and values to guide their recruiting and processes, this would not be possible.

Appendix A

Invitation to Participate in Study/Recruitment Letter

Dear {Athletic Director/Head Coach},
My name is Robert Dinsdale. I am an Master's Student in the Department of Leadership and Educational Administration in the Faculty of Education at Brandon University. I am undertaking a study titled, *Organizational Culture and Values as a Driver of Sustained Success*. The purpose of this study is to investigate the organizational culture and values that have contributed to North Dakota State University Football's unprecedented success in the Football Championship Subdivision. I plan to conduct interviews with yourself and the Head Coach, as well as focus groups with two assistant coaches and two player leaders. The overall goal is to develop an understanding of how the organizational culture and values of Bison football have contributed to their success over the last twelve years. The study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What unifiers and values have contributed to and defined the unprecedented success of the Bison dynasty?

2. How did these unifiers and values overcome the tremendous challenges of sustaining success at the FCS level?

3. What strategies were used to create the opportunity for interactions that develop shared values and unify diverse elements of the program towards a common goal?

This letter is to obtain your consent to participate in an interview and permission to proceed with the research on the North Dakota State Football program. Once I have gained your permission, I will send an invitation to participate to the Head Coach. I will also ask the Head Coach for permission to conduct focus groups with two assistant coaches and two player leaders. Your interview, the head coach interview, and focus groups with the other participants will take place using video conferencing on the Teams platform and will take between 30 minutes to one hour (see interview questions attached). Interviews will be audio and video recorded and the audio recording will be transcribed. Only the audio recording will be used in the study. Therefore, all participants will have the option to turn their video off during the interview.
The results of the study will be shared in a thesis defense, may be published in a journal, and may be the subject of public presentations. While I will strive to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of participants by using pseudonyms, I am unable to guarantee the anonymity of the participants as individuals may recognize statistics or stories connected to the program. However, regarding external publications and presentations, I am seeking permission to use the name of the football program and to designate the formal positions of Athletic Director and Head Coach (see consent form). I believe that the work in this initiative is important and that recognition through publications and presentations of the research would be positive for the Football Program and School. If you prefer to have the program and the roles of personnel (Athletics Director and Head Coach) remain anonymous, I will be happy to use a pseudonym for the School and Program and to refer to a more generalized description of your formal roles (leader and coordinator).

In order to grant informed consent for the study, you need to know:
- There are no incentives to participate, other than the opportunity to contribute to the project.
- Participation is entirely voluntary and there are no repercussions for not participating.
- Pseudonyms will be used to preserve anonymity of participants.
- Participants will have the opportunity to check transcripts of interviews for accuracy.
- Participants may withdraw at any time up until the transcripts have been reviewed. If no response is received after one week of sending the transcript a reminder email will be sent. Then if no response is received within one week of the follow up email, it will be assumed that final consent is reaffirmed.
- Confidentiality will be maintained as the raw data and identities of participants will be seen only by the researcher and their supervisor. Participants within the focus groups will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. Data will be stored on password protected computers and destroyed after a period of 5 years.
- There are no foreseeable risks to participation. The benefit of participation will be adding to the understanding of the importance of "organizational culture and values".
- There are no conflicts of interest on the part of the researcher and the data/results will not be commercialized.
- Consent does not waive any rights to legal recourse in the case of research related harm.

This research has been approved by the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee (BUREC), any issues or concerns regarding ethics should be addressed to BUREC at (redacted)2 or (redacted). Any questions about the design of this project may be addressed to myself (redacted) or Jacqueline Kirk (redacted).

In order to provide consent for me to contact you for an interview and to provide permission for me to proceed with the research and to contact the Head Coach, assistant coaches, and player leaders simply respond, using your official school email address to (redacted). To help in your decision, the invitations and interview questions for all participants are included with this email.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Dinsdale
Department of Leadership and Educational Administration
Faculty of Education
Brandon University

Informed Consent – Athletic Director

Project title: Organizational Culture and Values as a Driver of Sustained Success

Study investigator:

Principal Investigator: Robert Dinsdale – Masters Student

Brandon University Faculty of Education

Funding source:

This study is not funded.

Invitation to participate:

You are invited to participate in a research study. Choosing whether or not to participate is entirely your choice. If you decide not to participate, there will be no negative impacts on your relationship with the researcher. The information provided in this form tells you about what is involved in the research, what you will be asked to do, and any potential risks or benefits. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have. Consent is an ongoing process. During the research study, we will regularly confirm your consent and you will have the opportunity to withdraw at any time.

Purpose of the research study:

Building a culture of success is a very real challenge in a rapidly changing world. This is especially true in college football. The North Dakota State Bison have built a dynasty that has won nine of the last eleven Football Championship Subdivision National Championships. The program has done this with changes in head coach and while experiencing yearly turnover as players graduate or finish with the program. The study will examine the organizational culture and values that have driven the Bison Football Programs sustained success.

What you will be asked to do:

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to participate in a 30-60 minute interview or focus group discussing Bison Football organizational culture and values. Upon transcription of the interviews and focus groups you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and propose edits or changes to the transcript to ensure that it accurately reflects your thoughts.

Who can take part in the research study?

To be involved in this study, you must be the Athletic Director, Head Coach, an assistant coach, or player leader with the North Dakota State University Bison Football program.

Possible risks and benefits:

Risks: The potential risks and harm for participants in this study are minimal. A potential harm for participating in this study is the inconvenience of participation in the research. This study will take 30-60 minutes of the participants time to complete interviews or focus groups. Participants may be discoverable to one another in the community and readers of the report because stories they share may be known.

Benefits: There is no guarantee that you will benefit directly from participating in this study. However, the focus groups or interviews will provide you with the opportunity to voice your opinion on your experiences with North Dakota State Football.   The research will benefit the participant group as it is examining positive aspects of the North Dakota State Football Program's culture. The study will explore what the program did to build the most successful Football Championship Subdivision program. The benefit to society will be an expanded knowledge base on how to build a sustained culture of success.

Compensation/reimbursement:

There is no compensation or reimbursement for participating in this study.

Privacy and confidentiality:

All documents and recordings will be identified only by code number and kept on a password protected laptop. You will not be identified by name in the transcription of the recording of either the interview or focus groups. Participants will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. I am asking for consent to use the school name, football program name, and the terms Athletic Director and Head Coach in the study.

Limits to confidentiality: Please be aware that there are limits to confidentiality in a focus group setting. All members of the focus group will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement that ensures they will respect the privacy of other members and keep what is said confidential. Please keep this in mind when deciding what you feel comfortable sharing. No personal information will be shared with anyone outside of the core research team, unless required by law. Instances where researchers are required, by law, to breach confidentiality include the following: child abuse or neglect that is ongoing and unknown to police, cases of imminent risk of physical harm to oneself or another, cases of sexual abuse, sexual assault, or sexual harassment by a health professional.

Reporting of results:

Although the project outcomes will be determined by the research findings, possible research products will include: articles in academic journals, a published thesis document, and presentations. All information will be coded, therefore, you will not be identified by name in any publication. We ask for consent to use your title (Athletic Director, Head Coach, assistant coach, player leader) in this study. If consent is granted quotes will be attributed to the title of each individual. All results of this study will be shared with participants.

Withdrawing from the study:

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to participate. If you decide to participate but change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time without consequence. Your decision to withdraw will not influence your relationship with the researcher in any way. Once you have participated in focus group discussion, you will not be able to withdraw your responses. However, you are free to stop participating in the discussion at any point.

Conflicts of interest:

The researcher has no conflicts of interest in this study.

Questions and contact information:

If you have any questions about the study or would like more information, please contact:

Robert Dinsdale

This research study was reviewed and approved by the Brandon University Research Ethics Board.

Consent Page:

Project title: Organizational Culture and Values as a Driver of Sustained Success

Primary Investigator: Robert Dinsdale

Statement of consent

By e-mailing consent, I agree that:

· The study has been explained to me.

· All my questions have been answered.

· Possible harm and discomforts and possible benefits (if any) of this study have been explained to me.

· I have been told that my personal information will be kept confidential.

In addition, I understand that:

· I have the right not to participate and the right to stop at any time.

· I may refuse to participate without consequence.

· I have a choice of not answering specific questions.

· I am free now, and in the future, to ask any questions about the study.

· I will receive a copy of the interview transcript for review and clarification.

· I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

I agree that the interview/focus group can be video recorded (only audio portion will be used for analysis). £Yes £No

I agree that the names North Dakota State University and North Dakota State Bison Football can be used in the study. £Yes £No

I agree that the titles Athletic Director and Head Coach can be used in the study. £Yes £No

_____ _____ _____

Name   Signature   Date

Please provide an email address to be sent a summary of the study results.

Appendix B

Head Coach Interview Questions

1. What are the core values the define the Bison Football Culture?

2. As a Head Coach, what do you do to ensure these values are lived and acted out by coaches, staff, and players in the program?

3. What tools do you use to create opportunities for these values to permeate throughout the program?

4. When recruiting players, what are the traits you look for in student athletes to sustain and build the Bison football culture?

5. When hiring coaches, what are the traits you look for to sustain and build the Bison football culture?

Appendix C

Athletic Director Interview Questions

1. What are the core values that define the Bison Football Program?

2. What steps does the athletics department take to ensure that these values are achieved within the Bison Football Program and Athletics Department?

3. The selection of a head coach is vital to the success of an FCS football program. What considerations did you make when looking to hire Coach Klieman's successor?

   a. Probe: What traits/skills are desirable to ensure the sustained success and culture of the Bison Football Program?

4. How have you approached building a culture of success at North Dakota State University?

5. What structures are in place to create opportunities for these values to permeate through Bison Football?

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

Assistant Coaches:

1. What are the core values that define Bison football?

2. What structures and strategies have been put in place to ensure that these values are lived and acted out by all members of the program?

3. What traits does the program view as desirable in student athletes when recruiting athletes that will sustain and build Bison football culture?

Players:

1. What are the core values that define Bison Football?

2. What structures and strategies have been put in place to ensure that these values are lived and acted out by all members of the program?

3. As leaders in the program, how do you ensure student athletes sustain and build the Bison football culture?

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Welcome, let's get started. Before I start recording, I would like to go over the items that guide your consent to participate one more time just to confirm that you are comfortable with the process before we continue.

- There are no incentives to participate, other than the opportunity to contribute to the project.
- Participation is entirely voluntary and there are no repercussions for not participating.
- Pseudonyms will be used to preserve anonymity of participants.
- Participants will have the opportunity to check transcripts of interviews for accuracy.
- Participants may withdraw at any time up until the transcripts have been reviewed. If no response is received after one week of sending the transcript a reminder email will be sent. Then if no response is received within one week of the follow up email, it will be assumed that final consent is reaffirmed.
- Confidentiality will be maintained as the raw data and identities of participants will be seen only by the researcher and their supervisor. Participants within the focus groups will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. Data will be stored on password protected computers and destroyed after a period of 5 years.
- There are no foreseeable risks to participation. The benefit of participation will be adding to the understanding the importance of "organizational culture and values".
- There are no conflicts of interest on the part of the researcher and the data/results will not be commercialized.
- Consent does not waive any rights to legal recourse in the case of research related harm.

[I already have initial consent via email and the participant has a copy of the information regarding consent.]

Now, I will start recording. If you would prefer not to answer any question, just say, "Pass" and I will move on to the next one. If, at any point, you would like to stop the interview, just say, "I would like to stop, now" and I will discontinue and let you choose whether you would like to have the information that you have shared included in the data of the study or removed from the data altogether.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Are you ready to begin the interview? Is it ok for me to record the interview?

[Start Recording]

Questions are asked here

[Stop Recording]

Before we complete the interview, I want to reconfirm that you feel comfortable with letting me use the information that you have provided as part of my study. Is it ok with you if I save this recording and audio transcription to use as part of my data analysis? I will share a text-based version of our discussion via email. Once received, I will ask you to read it, correct any errors, highlight portions that you would like to have removed from the data, and send it back to me to confirm that I can use the remainder of the transcript, including the corrections you made, as part of the data for this study. I want to remind you that you are able to withdraw from the study until the point at which you send the transcript back. If you want to withdraw for any reason, just send an email to let me know and I will remove our interview from the data for this study and delete any record that I have, including the recording and the transcription. Your participation was voluntary and I will not ask questions about why you have chosen to withdraw.

When I send the transcript back, I will wait a week for your response and then I will send a reminder. If you do not respond within a week of the reminder, I will assume that you are comfortable with me using the transcript of this interview as part of my data. I need to stress that once you have read the transcript and sent it back for me to use or once a week has passed following the reminder to respond to the email containing the transcript, you will no longer be able to remove your data from the study. I will remind you about this when I send the transcript to you.

Thank-you for participating in the interview portion of this research.

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