

**ROLE STRAIN OF GRADUATE ASSISTANTS IN
COLLEGIATE ATHLETICS**

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The support staff from graduate assistants to the Director of Basketball Operations plays a vital role in any sport organization's success. They are the team behind the team. Graduate Assistants in intercollegiate athletics have many roles to fulfill. They have the role of a student, family member, friend, coach, and additional duties and responsibilities that come with their graduate assistantship. All of these roles interfere with one another, such as finding a time to study and complete school work while maintaining the responsibilities at work and practice on a daily basis. The problem is managing time to fulfill all of your responsibilities and duties as both a graduate student and a graduate assistant and still find time to have a personal life.

Goode's theory suggests that in general, people want to fulfill all of the expectations placed upon them (Goode, 1960). However, there will certainly be some cases in which they are unable to do so. This often brings on role strain and role stress. *Role strain* is manifested when an individual has difficulty meeting the various obligations associated with the multiple roles. Also related to role strain is *role stress*, a condition in which role obligations are "vague, irritating, difficult, conflicting, or impossible to meet." Work by Mobily (1991) suggests that role strain has several contributing factors: role conflict, role overload, role ambiguity, and role incongruity.

Therefore, according to the Goode role theory, a graduate assistant who simultaneously occupies the role as a student, coach, and family member/friend may not be able to fulfill

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all of the role expectations (eg, expectations from the Head Coach, Professor). Conflicts associated with time commitments and priorities may arise and may result in role strain.

Definitions

1. Role Ambiguity- the degree to which clear information is lacking with respect to the expectations associated with a role (Journal of Athletic Training, 2008).
2. Role Conflict- the existence of clear but competing or incompatible expectations (Journal of Athletic Training, 2008).
3. Role Incongruity- the expectations for role performance run counter to the individual's self-perception, disposition, attitudes, and values (Journal of Athletic Training, 2008).
4. Role Overload- the role expectations are too complex or make too many demands for the time and energy available or there is conflict between quality and quantity given the time constraint (Journal of Athletic Training, 2008).
5. Role Strain- the stress or strain experienced by an individual when incompatible behavior, expectations, or obligations are associated with a single social role (Dictionary, 2009)

The researcher has had the great opportunity to work for the North Carolina State University Women's basketball team for the past four years as a student manager under the beloved Head Coach Kay Yow. Two of those years, have come as a Graduate Assistant manager with increased roles and expectations. The researcher's current role is overseeing the other managers and making sure duties and responsibilities are fulfilled, accounting for all equipment, and reporting any problems to the Head Equipment Manager, Brenda Keene. Another name for this role could be Head Manager which comes with seniority and experience. The role is assigned to the person with the most number of years as a manager and will last until he or she graduates or exhausts their eligibility with the program. An NCAA mandated rule limits any type of manager to six years with a program.

The time commitment associated with this role varies depending on the time of year. Once official practice starts in mid-October it is on average four hours a day, six days a week just for practices each week. The four hours includes 30 minutes before and after practice for set up and take down, plus a 3 hour practice each day. Once the season starts there will be two to three games per week. Gamedays are also long days after you add up time spent on shootaround, pre-game meal, pre-game duties and responsibilities, the game itself, and post-game duties and responsibilities. The time commitment can be a huge sacrifice to your studies and personal life and it takes a person with good time

management, organizational, and communication skills to succeed as a graduate or undergraduate manager.

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One common problem the researcher has noticed over the years as a student manager is that there is no formal manual or guide for managers to refer to when a question arises. Instead of taking time to ask questions about what needs to be done a manual could provide answers to the most frequently asked questions for current and future managers. In addition, a manual could make the transitional phase for new managers easier because there would be a written list of tasks, duties, and responsibilities expected from them which could help get them in their daily routine for practice and game days quicker. Lastly, potential new manager's could look at the manual to see the tasks and responsibilities expected of the Graduate Assistant Manager during the interview stage which could help them gauge their interest in the position.

The Graduate Assistant Manager's Manual for women's basketball could help decrease role ambiguity by specifying duties and responsibilities of all aspects of the program. As Bandura (1997) noted, "if one does not know what demands must be fulfilled in a given endeavor, one cannot accurately judge whether one has the requisite abilities to perform the task. . . . Discrepancies between efficacy belief and performance will arise when either the tasks or the circumstances under which they are performed are ambiguous".

In an interdependent team environment, Bandura's (1997) task ambiguity—a lack of clear understanding of the task—has a parallel in role ambiguity—lack of clear information associated with a particular role in a group. The manual would have the

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specific task and responsibilities associated within that task so that there would be a clearer understanding of the task at hand. For example, duties and responsibilities for pre-season conditioning workouts would differ from the duties and responsibilities associated with a regular season practice and the manual would more clearly define expectations and duties of each decreasing role ambiguity.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a voluntary organization through which the nation's colleges and universities govern their athletics programs. It is comprised of institutions, conferences, organizations and individuals committed to the best interests, education and athletics participation of student-athletes.

Graduate Assistant's have long occupied a significant position in the organization of intercollegiate athletics. Since the status was created by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1976, the experience gained while serving as a graduate assistant has come to be regarded as extremely important to the career development and advancement in intercollegiate athletics. However, it appears that few research studies have looked at the role strain placed upon Graduate Assistant's and the conflicting demands of being a student and fulfilling job duties and responsibilities.

The following sections will discuss organizational role theory, the effects of role conflict and ambiguity on job performance, stress related to role strain, and coping behaviors from the stress/strain relationship.

Role theory has occupied a prominent position among the core ideas that constitute the sociological perspective. It has been estimated that at least 10% of all articles published in sociological journals make use of the role concept (Biddle, 1986). Biddle identified five distinct theoretical perspectives that have been formulated to deal

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with role concept (functional, symbolic interactionist, structural, organizational, and cognitive). The researcher will use the organizational perspective which has generated a great deal of research and defines a role in terms of expectations for behaviors associated with a social position.

Organizational Role Theory

Organizational role theory may be said to have begun with the seminal books of Gross et al (1958) and Kahn et al (1964). In addition, recent work includes review articles on role conflict research (Van Sell et al 1981, Fisher & Gitelson 1983, Bray 2002). Their efforts have built a version of role theory focused on social systems that are pre-planned, task-oriented, and hierarchical.

Roles in such organizations are assumed to be associated with identified social positions and to be generated by normative expectations, but norms may vary among individuals and may reflect both the official demands of the organizations and the pressures of informal groups (Biddle, 1986). Within organizational role theory, roles within groups are considered to be a set of prescriptions that define the behaviors required of an individual member who occupies a certain position (Bray, 2002). Given

multiple sources for norms, individuals are often subjected to role conflicts in which they must contend with antithetical norms for their behavior (Biddle, 1986). For example, a Graduate Assistant has assigned responsibilities and duties from the sport organization that he/she is expected to finish on a daily or weekly basis. However, there are also demands from informal groups such as being a student and spending time with friends

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and family. Such role conflicts produce strain and must be resolved if the individual is to be happy and the organization is to prosper.

A study by Thomas P. Dunn looked at role conflicts in the making of graduate assistant coaches. Graduate Assistants most frequently reported role conflicts between roles associated with being a graduate student and those associated with their status as coaches. An anonymous quote from Dunn's survey reflected the student-coach conflicts by saying "One of my professors is big on group projects. I really don't have the time to do my share. It's going to kill my grade." Only 35% of those surveyed indicated their coaching duties allowed them sufficient time to study (Dunn, 1997).

Effect of Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity on Job Performance

Scholars have long assumed that role conflict and role ambiguity, two of the most frequently examined sources of work stress (e.g. Jackson & Schuler, 1985), have deleterious effects on employee work performance (e.g. McGrath, 1976). Although role ambiguity and role conflict have been found to negatively affect individuals' well-being

and effective functioning within large organizations, it is also likely that these role perceptions will have important implications within small interdependent teams, where an individual's role responsibilities are interwoven with the role functions carried out by other team members (Beauchamp & Bray, 2001).

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Conceptually, it has been proposed that exposure to role stressors tends to reduce individuals' capacity to control their work environment which, in turn, is expected to adversely affect the individual's ability to function effectively (McGrath, 1976). More specifically, scholars have assumed that individuals have finite cognitive resources (e.g. span of attention and working memory capacity) to monitor their environment and behaviors (Cohen, 1980). It has been further proposed that prolonged exposure to a particular stressor, such as role conflict or role ambiguity, increases demand on individuals' cognitive resources. This increased demand on finite cognitive resources may occur because individuals must exert greater effort to evaluate and enact the appropriate coping responses to minimize the adverse effects of the threatening stressor (Cohen, 1980). As individuals devote more cognitive resources to coping with a focal stressor, they have fewer resources available for monitoring and enacting behaviors necessary for performing assigned job duties and responsibilities effectively and consistently (Cohen, 1980).

Research argues that employees who are exposed to a single threatening stressor at work may be able to use their personal experiences and capabilities to efficiently cope

with the focal stressor without exceeding their cognitive capacity and thus are still able to function successfully. However, it is further proposed here that employees may find it more difficult to function effectively in a work environment wherein a number of role stressors are present concurrently. That is, based on the conceptual model presented

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previously, the simultaneous presence of role conflict and role ambiguity is likely to create stressful job demands that exceed one's cognitive capacity to cope with both stressors. Consequently, the affected individuals' cognitive resources are substantially diminished, which in turn affects adversely their ability to work efficiently and effectively (McGrath, 1976). For example, when a graduate assistant has an assignment due and has to plan an away trip itinerary on top of class and practice he/she may be stressed and will not be able to work as effectively.

Stress Related to Role Strain

Stress is a phenomenon that affects everyone. The definition is never absolute and has been defined in many different ways. Rabin described stress as a condition in which there is a marked perceived discrepancy between demands on an individual and the individual's ability to respond. Additionally stress can be described as the interaction between stressors and the individual along with how the individual reacts to the stressors. Gieck describes stress as the individual's physical and emotional reaction to demands placed on him. Dewe suggests that stress is

what arises from those situations in which the individual perceives are about to tax his/her physical or emotional resources (Dewe, 1989).

There are a number of elements within the work environment that can be classified as stressors. Factors that are intrinsic to the job include poor working conditions, work overload, time pressures, physical danger, and shift work (Cooper,

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1987). Sources of stress pertaining to the employee's role in the organization include responsibility for lives, role ambiguity, and role conflict (Sutherland & Cooper, 1988). Responsibilities of a graduate assistant are often due at a certain time under a stressful environment because the Head Coach or the Director of Basketball Operations is stressed and it has a pinball effect on the graduate assistant. Many times they have multiple duties at once assigned by two or more of the assistant coaches, which results in conflicting demands placed upon them. For example, one assistant might have them type up the practice plan for the day while another assistant might have them break down film in addition to their daily duties which can creates role conflict and a stressful work environment.

The structure of the organization itself can also be a source of stress for employees. For example, hierarchical, top-down management structures that provide workers with little or no say in the decision-making process, restrictions on behavior, office politics, lack of effective consultation, and erratic working hours can

all have detrimental effects on workers' well-being (Cooper, 1987). A graduate assistantship is considered an entry level position and they are on the very bottom in terms of hierarchy within the organization. Thus, they have little say in decision making, both on and off the court.

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Stress-Strain Relationship: Coping Behaviors

The occupational stress-strain-coping framework articulated by Osipow and colleagues (Osipow, 1991; Osipow, and Davis, 1988) provides a useful theoretical formulation for understanding how certain work environment factors (that is, stressors that are potentially capable of causing stress) may create the perception of stress among employees, who then utilize their resources to cope with the stressors. The degrees of success of these methods, in conjunction with the intensity of the stressors as well as a number of personal variables, interact to produce a level of strain outcome (Osipow, 1991).

Furthermore, Osipow and Spokane (1983) identified a number of coping behaviors believed to be important in moderating the stress-strain relationship. These behaviors include recreational activities, which distract the individual from stressful events and provide a source of satisfaction outside the work environment; self-care behaviors, particularly participation in healthy activities; social support systems,

focused on relationships with family and friends, as well as participation in social groups; and rational/cognitive skills, which facilitate the effective management of time, effort, and reaction. For example, a graduate assistant can play intramurals with friends he/she has made or participate in other leisure activities with a family member or friend which would provide a source of satisfaction outside the workplace.

Everyone's reaction to stress will differ. Some people will react in a positive manner, which is using stress as a motivational tool, or in a negative manner, which can

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lead to chronic stress and burnout. Chronic stress can happen to anyone in any profession. Burnout is a reaction to chronic stress that involves negative interactions between environmental and personal characteristics, and as a chronic condition that develops when one is working too hard for too long in a high-pressure situation.

“One can experience stress without burnout, but not burnout without stress”

(Hendrix, 2000).

Being a graduate student and working in intercollegiate athletics can produce many types of role stressors. First, there is the role of a student. As a graduate student there are increased demands and expectations of assignments, projects, and time devoted to schoolwork. At the same time a graduate student should be ambitious, well organized, hard working, responsible, and have a success driven

attitude to meet these demands placed upon them. Second, there is the role within the sport organization that you are affiliated with. There are duties and responsibilities that must be met on a daily and weekly basis. Also, there is time devoted to practices, games, travel, and miscellaneous activities with the team that is very demanding and time consuming. In addition, there is the role of being a family member. A good family member has characteristics of a listening ear, being helpful, being responsible, trustworthy, caring and loving. Lastly, there is the role of being a friend and maintaining these relationships. The challenge is finding time to fulfill these roles daily. Sometimes sacrifices will have to be made here and there and these can be tough decisions. For example, the researcher was in the middle of the semester and the beginning of basketball practice last fall and was unable to attend a weekend at a mountain house with friends because of the busy schedule and

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schoolwork that had to be done. A graduate student working in intercollegiate athletics has to prioritize his/her roles and be focus driven with great time management skills.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Description of the Organization

North Carolina State's women's basketball program is one of the most historic programs in the history of women's basketball. The women's basketball program has

been a part of the NCAA since it was founded in 1981. The Wolfpack had a six year existence prior to joining the NCAA Division 1 ranks and in that time established itself as one of the premier collegiate basketball institutions in the nation. Since joining the NCAA the Wolfpack has been invited to participate in 20 of the 27 NCAA Division 1 Women's Basketball Tournaments.

Women's basketball in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) is very competitive, the Wolfpack Women have established some incredible marks among the nation's elite. Much of this has to be attributed to the longtime legendary Coach Kay Yow who unfortunately passed away after a long, inspirational, and courageous battle with breast cancer. The Hall of Fame coach led the Wolfpack Women for 34 seasons, guiding them to twenty-two 20-win seasons, 20 NCAA Tournament appearances, 11 "Sweet 16" berths and a Final Four run in 1998, seven top-10 national finishes, five ACC Championships and four ACC Tournament titles. Reynolds Coliseum has served as the only home of women's basketball. In the last 33 years, NC State has an overall record of 346-88 (.797) mark at Reynolds Coliseum giving the wolfpack women a distinct home court advantage.

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The women's basketball program is well represented both on and off the court. The NC State women's basketball team is heavily involved in the community and their main outreach program is through the Wake County Girls and Women in Sport (G-Wis) Foundation. Each season, players, coaches, and staff go to elementary and middle

schools in Wake and Vance counties to talk to girls about the importance of being active and staying fit.

The Wolfpack Women's Basketball organization is comprised of players, coaches, and support staff. The number of players varies from year to year but there is a maximum of 15 scholarship players for Division 1 institutions. There is a Head Coach and three assistant coaches. The support staff is comprised of a director of basketball operations, video coordinator, media relations, head equipment manager, graduate assistant, managers, athletic trainer, strength and conditioning coach, and an academic coordinator.

Head Coach, Kellie Harper is responsible for the overall direction of the program and oversees all aspects of the program. Assistant Coach Stephanie McCormick serves as recruiting coordinator, opponent scouting, team academics, and the development of Wolfpack post players. Assistant Coach Jon Harper is one of the primary recruiters, while also lending a hand in many day-to-day operations and on-court duties of the program. Director of Women's Basketball Operations at NC State oversees the day-to-day operations of the program, which includes the scheduling of team travel, games and practices, as well as serving as a liaison for the staff and team with athletics facilities,

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media relations, marketing, housing and residence Life, and all of the community outreach programs. The Video Coordinator serves as the direct contact for film exchange, production of team video projects, scouting tapes and video library compilations. The Graduate Assistant assists with the day-to-day operations, coordinates

the scout team efforts and serves as the secondary contact for GWIS. Head Equipment Manager serves as the coordinator of equipment and oversees all equipment at Reynolds Coliseum as well as the managers for the women's basketball program.

On April 16, 2009 NC State women's basketball welcomed its third coach in the history of the program naming Kellie Harper as Head Women's Basketball Coach and the successor to Hall of Fame Coach Kay Yow. She will continue to build on the legacy and rich tradition Coach Yow built while moving the program into the future.

End-users of Product

The end users of the Graduate-Undergraduate Assistant Manager's Manual will be current and future graduate and undergraduate managers, the equipment manager for the women's basketball team, and the new head women's basketball coach. In addition, it will be used when the head equipment manager addresses the managers at the beginning of each season regarding expectations, duties, and responsibilities. The manual will be filed in the head equipment manager's office for easy access by the current year's graduate and undergraduate managers. Also, there will be a copy of the

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manual on file in the red case which will be present at all team workouts and practices for easy reference while on the court.

Collaboration and Timeline

The collaboration process of what to include in the manual came from a couple of different sources. First, I talked to Kendra Bell who was a player and graduate assistant here at NC State. She created a Graduate Assistant's Manual for her final project two years ago so I received some input from her on creating a manual and also took a look at the manual she created. Her final product differs from mine, in that her manual is aimed toward the duties and responsibilities of a graduate assistant coach within the women's basketball program while my manual lists the duties and responsibilities of graduate and undergraduate managers in the women's basketball program. In addition, Brenda Keene who is Head Equipment Manager for women's basketball for the past 26 years and Hudson Jacobs, former manager for five years, were both instrumental in helping me decide what I wanted to include in the manual and how it would be constructed. Lastly, I talked with the manager's from last year's team and received their input on what they wanted in the manual since they will be the first users of my product.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Description of Product

The product is an informative manual for graduate and undergraduate student managers of the North Carolina State Women's Basketball program. The manual is broken down into five sections. First, there will be a welcome page highlighting the rich tradition here at NC State. The next section will be entitled pre-season. This section provides the manager a breakdown of what happens in pre-season from team meetings, pictures, to the actual conditioning and skill workout duties and responsibilities. The third section is entitled practices. This section specifically highlights a typical practice with the duties and responsibilities expected from the managers from pre-practice set up to post-practice take down. The fourth section is entitled season. This section will be the most extensive as it is broken into four mini-sections: home games, away games, travel, and Hoops 4 Hope weekend. All four mini-sections have different duties and responsibilities associated with them and the manual will extensively break down these expectations. The last section is entitled post-season. It will be similar to the pre-season section with the only difference being the post-season awards banquet.

Implementation Plans

The plan is to have the manual implemented for the upcoming 2009-2010 season. It will be available to any person that would like to reference the manual in Brenda Keene's office.

Evaluation Methods

The manual will be evaluated by surveying people that will use the manual during the 2009-2010 basketball season. I will specifically survey the five managers with the program next season as well as Brenda Keene on the effectiveness of the manual. Since data from the survey could be skewed being that the managers for the upcoming season have all been affiliated with the program for a few seasons and the fact that all will graduate, I will come back the following year and give the new first year managers the same survey and evaluate the effectiveness of the manual.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The strengths of the manual are the experiences I had with being a manager for four years as well as the additional contacts I had to make sure I covered all aspects of being a graduate and undergraduate student manager for the women's basketball program at NC State. Brenda Keene has 25 years of experience and oversees the managers so I took what she wanted from the manual and added some stuff from my perspective as well as Hudson Jacobs, the longest tenured manager in the history of the program.

With the expertise collaborated to create this manual, it could provide current and future managers everything a manager needs to know to be successful in the Wolfpack Women's basketball program. The clear understanding of responsibilities and duties could increase role clarity and create a less stressful work environment.

The weaknesses of the manual are that it is geared solely for use by the Wolfpack Women's Basketball program and no other. Certainly other teams could take what they want from it but every program is run differently because no one coach is the same. Also, another weakness is that it will have to be updated periodically as things within the organization could change from year to year.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

I learned several things throughout the course of this project. On a personal note I learned how to deal with the loss of a close friend and legend Kay Yow, who was inspirational to many people around the world. Through those difficult weeks I thought about some words Coach Yow had said many times before and I quote “when life kicks you, let it kick you forward.” Those words inspired me to move forward past my sorrows as Coach Yow would have wanted me to do and celebrate the courageous life she lived.

On a scholarly note, I learned that the simultaneous presence of role conflict and role ambiguity is likely to create stressful job demands that exceed one's cognitive capacity to cope with both stressors and will ultimately decrease job performance. In addition, stress related to role strain can come in many forms including factors that are intrinsic to the job such as, poor working conditions, work overload, time pressures, and physical danger in addition to the structure of the organization where entry level employees have little or no say. Lastly, everyone's reaction to stress will differ. Some will react in a positive manner which is using stress as a motivational tool, while others will react in a negative manner. This can lead to chronic stress and burnout which is neither good for that person's personal health or the overall well being of the organization.

One thing that went well was the combination of my experience along with several other sources in writing the manual. It made knowing what to put in the manual

and writing it fairly easy because the saying goes the more experience you have, the better off you will be. Although I would have to make some corrections to the manual due to the loss of a beloved and inspirational coach, which presented a challenge that stalled my progress.

The major challenge I had with this project was the fact of not knowing who the next coach of the women's basketball was going to be for a majority of the semester. I had geared my manual based off the program run by Coach Yow and her assistants. Not knowing who the next coach was going to be, made it tough to know whose coaching philosophies and principles to gear the manual toward. However, I have since met Head Coach Kellie Harper and have had to make some minor changes to my manual which is more suited for her philosophy as far as how practice is run, pre and post season workouts, and managers duties and responsibilities on away games.

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