

Jester and King: The Symbolic Role of the University Mascot
in Performative Service of the Public Good

A Capstone Project

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By

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Abstract

Advisor: Brian Pusser

This qualitative case study examined how the University of Virginia mascot “Cavman” serves a public service mission, while also studied how people perceive Cavman and UVA, through the embodiment of Cavman in a public service mission. Using a conceptual framework supported by organizational theory (Bolman and Deal; Meyer and Rowan) and semiotics (Pierce), this study includes a document analysis of historical information related to the mascot, along with 10 semi-structured interviews with both performers of the mascot along with community members that had varying experiences with the mascot. The interviews and document analysis were coded using seven codes derived from the conceptual framework: connect, strengthen, inspire, tell story, seek soul, understand, and make meaning. Findings suggest that Cavman is an elevated, meaningful symbol of the university, firmly aligned with the public service mission of a university, in terms of a mascot’s role in deepening, often joy-filled connections in a community. There is very little research on the pro-social benefits of a university mascot, with this study laying the groundwork for more research on a mascot’s untapped, broadening potentials.

Keywords: mascots, symbols, universities, colleges, semiotics, organizational theory

Dedication

This capstone is dedicated to my wife Nell Weber, our three darling children – Rose, Hank, and Fred – and my advisor Brian Pusser, who all carried me across the finish line after a 6-year, often bumpy, incredibly nourishing journey.

And to Cavman.

Acknowledgements

For those about to read this, it is important to note that I am not an academic or a researcher. I am a storyteller, humorist, and memoirist – so writing this 119 page, generously cited research paper forced me to flex new muscles I didn't know I had. With that said, I am incredibly blessed by the people who helped make this 6-year, part-time (during COVID-times) doctoral journey happen:

My wife and best friend Nell pulled me through it and always made sure to celebrate the small milestones. She coached me, supported me, watched children, and endured all the emotions that come with the doctoral journey. She instilled in me a mantra of persistence -- and for her love and wisdom, I am indebted. I love you Nell –along with Rose, Hank, and Fred -- and I thank you profoundly. And maybe one day, after I am long gone, my kids will get around to reading this and hopefully derive some joy and curiosity from their Dad's unusual research specialty – and perhaps be inspired to keep learning and better appreciate the whimsical world around them.

I think I picked the best committee in the history of doctoral studies. Brian Pusser, my chair was present and responsible at the original moment of this case study idea, from the class session when he introduced symbols to me in our coursework. He encouraged me to pursue my post-COVID era passion around mascots and always reminded me the importance to point the work towards the public good. He was my Virgil, always patient and supportive and helpful and good natured for a sustained period – amidst missed deadlines and my occasional cat-like sensibilities. There was no better chair than Brian and I was fortunate to learn so much from his brilliant mind and warm heart in the process. Thank you, my friend Brian!

Christian Steinmetz was my rock and rockstar from the very beginning – I thought about dropping out of the program multiple times, and she always encouraged me to stay in it. Her writing groups, friendly emails, and incredibly helpful tips and comments throughout the process helped me more than just survive, but flourish. For being my therapist and lifeline over these 6 years, I am so grateful.

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Sadly, I have lost loved ones during this doctoral journey – and I'd like to thank my dear mother-in-law, Brian O'Donnell, and my Great Aunt Mary Warner – who were incredibly supportive to me along the way and have since passed away. To all my grandparents and loved ones who have passed away and came before me, often making great sacrifices in the betterment of their family's lives, I am grateful for what you all have done. The great grandson of an immigrant Irish house cleaner and the grandson of a bowling alley pin setter is now a doctor – and while I'm not a medical doctor, hopefully they still get some bragging rights in heaven.

Finally, and not the least, my family and friends all deserve incredible amounts of appreciation: my mom and dad, Peggy and John, vigorously cheered me on and gave me such a powerful base of love and curiosity to root this study. I am who I am because of them and cannot thank them enough for this gift of a good life. I am grateful to my not-pesky sisters Kerry and Elizabeth -- and nieces and nephews who cared about me and supported me – along with my terrific co-workers and friends from Jim Ryan and Margaret Noland who blessed this project and generously allowed me to pursue this program while working – to David and Doris who loved me and let me write in their basement, the McGahrens for their love and pizzas, Shawn Anderson for modeling IRB and writing excellence (and coffee excellence), Adam Seid for letting me borrow books to pass my comps while also making me quiche, Matt Banfield for setting the bar high in terms of how to finish one of these things, Brian Cullaty for his friendship and support, to Gerry Starsia for his great courses and taking an interest in me, to the 10 REMARKABLE people I interviewed as part of this case study, to Dean Stephanie Rowley for her caring support and leadership, Nadia Cempre for her PATIENCE and humanity, Jesse McCain for his friendship and disc golfery, Margot Rogers and Hampton Newson for their care and good cheer, Andrew Sage for inspiring me with his excellence and dear friendship, Abby Self for her collegiality and kindness, Julie Caruccio for her example and excellence, Jon Bowen for his companionship and coffees, Fernando Reimers for his stalwart encouragement over decades, Judy McLaughlin for taking chances on me and believing in me, Kyle O’Connor for lasting friendship and sports, Heidi Johnson for her love and her lasagnas, to Carla Williams for letting me wear the Cavman suit in 2020, Kevin Thurman for being so collaborative and open to me helping out, and to God who has given all of this to me and I hope I am doing some good with it.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Once upon a time, not so long ago, I was a 37-year-old college mascot. Perhaps, I may have even been the oldest student to perform the college mascot, and maybe even the tallest college mascot performer, at six foot three and ¼ inches, stretching out sweaty spandex typically suited for someone a foot shorter. For one year, I performed the time-honored role of the University of Virginia “Cavman” (O’Hare, 2015). It was less of an extracurricular and more of a civic duty, given that the official Cavman program was shut down in 2020, along with college athletics and in-person schooling at the University of Virginia (Firozi et al., 2020). In an attempt to maintain community, build culture, and keep us connected during an unprecedented pandemic, the mighty cheerleader that is our university mascot seemed needed most, and yet it sat dormant in a large black duffle bag, crumpled lifeless in the corner of an equipment trailer. With the permission of the President and Athletics Director, I was granted access to the bag and its contents, with one caveat: *Do good with it.*

As I unzipped the bag and looked down at the oversized foam face of a mustachioed man, feather in hat – I saw potential. With no sports to attend and an uncertain fate of a troubled world, what can be the role of a mascot?

Therein lies the heart of this story and my newfound research. When in possession of a symbol that is a suit – with an actual cape (Hall, 2023) – what is its power, how does one deploy its power, and to what end? And is it the suit or the one in the suit that has power, or both? For me, this journey led to Mother’s Day visits, nursing home dancing, teacher appreciation surprises, COVID ward cameos, Zoom-bombing of college roommates, neighborhood parades on the back of pickup trucks, community housing trick-or-treating, anniversary greetings,

basketball playing with special needs children, and recognition for birthdays of all ages (Grimes, 2020). That year, I developed many things (including forehead acne), spit out the unique drippings of both sweat and tears, changed clothes in dark alleys in the backseat of my car, almost fainted at least three times – all culminating in my last appearance as Cavman, finally performing in the 60,000 seat Scott Stadium, yet not in support of football (Newman, 2021). Rather, the stadium was hosting the postponed graduation of the class of 2020 on a 90-degree day where Cavman helped lead a 1.1-mile march over from the iconic Rotunda, twice.

For me, it was an appropriate bookend to a year of revelation and transformation. The cape was coming off and the mascot program was reverting to the norm, with a merry cadre of undergrads taking on the role and cheering mostly at sporting events throughout the year. (Hirschheimer, 2021). My skin was clearing up. My evenings and weekends were now freer. But something else felt different, unfinished.

Do good with it.

I had hoped this was the case. I was not entirely sure what that looked like, but I know that in my experience as Cavman, I had felt and seen a special relationship between performer and audience. I had felt love in the extra joy of a child's hug, the spirit of a leaping high five, the familiarity in tired eyes, and giddiness – and, very occasionally, terror – on surprised first sights (Hough, 2021). In my newfound retirement from service as mascot, I was reminded of my favorite T.S. Eliot (1943) quote: “We had the experience but missed the meaning. And approach to the meaning restores the experience in a different form” (p. 48).

From having donned the cape, I both saw and felt the powerful force of good that can be a university mascot. It is part king and jester, a superhero channeling magic and lore and tradition and kinetics and art and heart. In a year of cheering for everything but sports, UVA's

cheerleader-in-chief emerged as embodiment of anthropomorphic alma mater and its public-facing responsibilities, and a cartoonishly powerful silent bridge to the pulse of days halcyon and present at dear old UVA.

And maybe some things I still do not understand. What is clear is that universities are turning increasing attention to their public service missions, to community engagement, and to the symbolic and instrumental ways in which the visibility and legitimacy of the university can serve the public good (Marginson, 2014). Universities work in the public good every day through the facilitation of volunteer programs, service learning, patient care, and citizen training for its students. Marginson would say that at best, public good ties Universities into a larger process of democratization and human development (2012). Faculty dedicate their research to powerful medical and societally improving breakthroughs, while athletics programs and arts initiatives enhance communal bonds. Based on my own experiences and prior research, it appears to me that the university mascot has the potential to make a significant contribution as an essential aspect of the university's service mission.

Now I know this is not the common narrative for scholarship around mascots. In fact, most research focuses on mascots that are doing more harm than good in one's community. These are mascots that blatantly and egregiously misappropriate a culture or group and are found in the numerous citations and literature on Native American mascots (King & Springwood, 2001). Many of these examples result in the removal of a mascot from the community after protest, and the subsequent replacing with a more appropriate symbol of that community. These examples are mostly at the collegiate level, but many exist in high schools as well.

A similar thread of scholarship also focuses on mascots that represent an era rooted in the Confederacy (*College football and its Civil War Symbols*, 2017). These mascots are mainly

centered in the Southern United States and depict a character or person that would've been sympathetic or a representative of the Confederate army. Mascots in this vein, as with Native American depictions, are and were largely part of an ongoing movement to replace and remove them from various communities. With such discussions, come a wave of protest and battles around tradition and unsettled social discourse in American society.

There is also a third grouping of mascot literature and that is looking at mascots as business-centered commodities (Brown & Ponsonby-McCabe, 2014). This applies more largely to mascots in professional sports, merchandising, and as features of a larger business enterprise. When a new NFL team gets a new mascot, there are business cases for why one is chosen and what they will do for the improvement of business. Within this is literature on why some franchises do not have mascots (e.g., New York Yankees) and the rationale for their omission from an organization (Kamieniecki, 2021).

Here, we see more of a marketing-centered look at what they mean towards a bottom line and their very specific role in the work of a for-profit organization. While I will discuss some of the literature and research on efforts to build university “brands,” I will argue that the essential purposes of building awareness and recognition of for-profit and nonprofit organizations is distinctly different. While for-profit organizations build brand recognition to maximize profit (Lodish et al., 2007), non-profit universities build recognition, in the words of Weisbrod, Ballou and Asche (2008), to “maximize mission and mission goods” (p. 2). It is the role of mascots in that mission that is the central topic of this project, without a dedicated focus on the entertainment or marketing-related outcomes of mascot analysis; rather, this will focus on the public service outcomes, in a bifurcation that is novel and rarely found in the existing mascot literature.

There are a few formal groupings of mascots that exist, that attempt to order and professionalize what they do. Each year, there is a mascot conference within sports' realms that discuss the habits and work of a mascot (Stebbins, 2023). There is also a mascot museum and hall of fame that exists as well, capturing the ebullience and history of various depictions (Mascot Hall of Fame, 2024). Mascots have captured a certain imagination in American society, longitudinally, and there remains keen interest in the history and lore around who performed as the mascot and the often-cryptic traditions associated with each program.

The specifics of the UVA mascot program date back to before there was even a Cavman mascot as we know him today. In 1925, a UVA student submitted a song to a college fight song competition – the song won and was called “The Cavalier Song,” with the name “Cavaliers” sticking as UVA’s athletics moniker (O’Hare 2015). The University of Virginia’s first known mascots were two living dogs named “Beta” and “Seal,” existing from the 1920’s to the 1940’s (Hall 2023). From 1947-1983, the University would see, on and off, the “Cavalier on Horseback” – typically a student dressed up as a cavalier and riding a horse (Virginia Sports 2020). In 1983, we saw a more commercialized character emerge on to the scene called “The ‘Hoo” – an orange, furry character that quickly became unpopular and was described in Sports Illustrated as “a bastard child born out of the incestuous relationship between the athletic department and the cash register” (1983: The ‘Hoo). This commercial failure led to the adoption of the familiar looking large headed Cavalier character mascot in 1984, which would eventually be named Cavman in 2000 (Hall 2023).

Purpose of the Study

With my own personal experience and a closer analysis of mascot literature and lore, I am excited to forge a less traveled stream of literature focusing on the service role that mascots perform for the public good.

My work will not look at the misappropriated or negative depictions of mascots. It will not focus on the business side or historical perspective. My hope is that this new research will thread the needle of examining the role of the mascot as a university symbol, and how it is used in service of the public good. Some examination will be given to what is a public good and how one defines this. While there is considerable prior research on university mission and engagement, this study will add to our understanding of the role of mascots in serving the public good – with a focus on service as a critical triad in the leg of many university core elements of teaching, research, and service -- and to provide a connection to prior research on symbols and images in university outreach and engagement.

Research Questions:

My research questions are straightforward: 1) In what ways does Cavman serve a public service mission?; and 2) How do people perceive Cavman (and UVA), through the embodiment of Cavman in a public service mission?

Conceptual Framework:

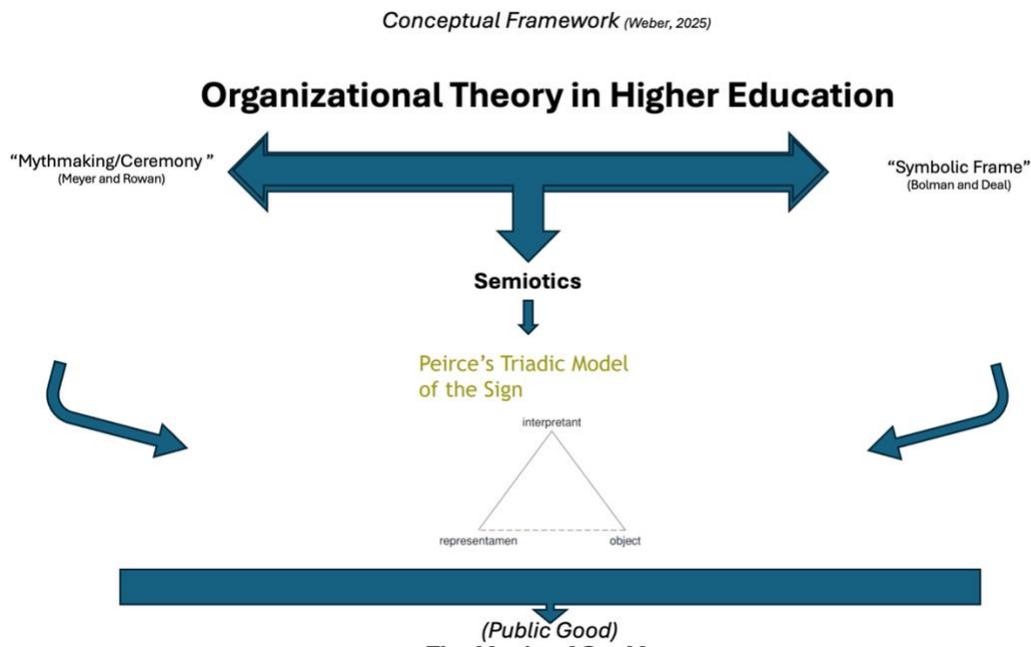
The conceptual framework I plan to utilize for this research is layered in higher education organizational theory focused on Bolman and Deal's symbolic framework, along with Meyer and

Rowan’s work on myths and rituals in higher education – buttressed from the field of semiotics.

A visual diagramming of my conceptual framework is below:

Figure 1

Conceptual framework



We see symbols and signs show up in a deeper understanding of the organizational symbolic framework in Bolman and Deal’s work, addressing a need for a sense of purpose and meaning in one’s organization (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Further scholarship is rooted in Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) probing of mythmaking and ceremony of institutionalized organization, observing that “any elements of formal structure are highly institutionalized and function as myths” (343) bridging an evolution to isomorphism which leads to legitimacy within an institution. Martinez-Aleman (2012) also delves into the broader semiotic understanding of what makes an American university both distinct and pragmatic, focuses on strands of history and accountability in defining its meaning. This broader oeuvre on mythmaking, organizational

theory, and semiotics does not ever reflect an analysis of mascots, but the scholarly support of their work provides suitable context for this framework and its applications.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) assert the premise “to maintain ceremonial conformity, organizations that reflect institutional rules tend to buffer their formal structures from the uncertainties of technical activities by becoming loosely coupled, building gaps between their formal structures and actual work activities” (p. 343). It is in this loose coupling, we see the formal structure of the Cavman decoupled from the work activities of teaching and research; he is something both insider and outsider; a very well-known unknown in a university setting. These objects become “highly institutionalized and thus in some measure beyond the discretion of any individual participant or organization” (p. 344). Here we see the groundwork for legitimacy at this organizational level and a place for the myth of Cavman.

Figure 2

Meyer and Rowan (1977) p. 346

American Journal of Sociology

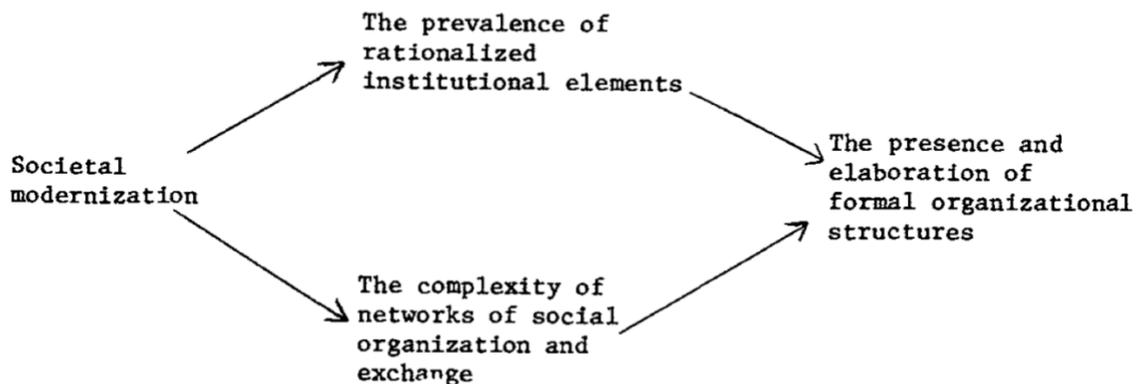


FIG. 1.—The origins and elaboration of formal organizational structures

(Meyer and Rowan (1977) p. 346)

From a perspective of survival and health of an organization, Meyer and Rowan would argue that organizations that have institutionalized myths are “more legitimate, successful, and likely to survive” (p. 361). This mythmaking research was incorporated in the symbolic framework of Bolman and Deal’s (1991) seminal higher education work on organizational theory, with a multi-frame, multi-sector analysis; exploring the inspiration, purpose filling, and meaning making elements of leadership -- appealing to the pathos and ethos of a workforce. Within the description of this frame, Bolman and Deal share that in the symbolic leadership frame, symbols are used to “unite and inspire followers, along with convening rituals and ceremonies in the process; while also respecting history, telling stories and seeking soul” (2014). There is an allusion in this symbolic framework to “magic” being a deep part of the experience. It is at this nexus of the symbolic frame and the meaning-making mascot, where I believe we will explore what magic the Cavman brings and how it is experienced (2014).

In addition to organizational theory in higher education, there is further support from the field of semiotics which comes from a widely used and seminal theory on signs called “Peirce’s Triadic Model of the Sign” or “Peirce’s’ Theory of Signs.” This framework explains how meaning is derived from objects and examines those who support this interpretation. In the case of my research, the sign is the mascot, the object is UVA – the thing the sign represents – and the interpretant is the audience, and to some extent the mascot performer, who understands the audience as they attempt “reading” or interpreting the sign as it spans boundaries. Let me say more about the broader theory below.

Charles Peirce was a pioneer in the field of semiotics in his attempt to better illuminate the field of science with a phenomenological approach to interpreting signs (Liszka, 1996). As Hoops (2014) posits, the breakthrough and revolutionary idea that he brings to the front is

differentiating an “idea” from a “sign” – an idea is distinctively and intrinsically known, whereas a sign is without an apparently known meaning. Peirce builds a triangle model – and argues that a sign is interpreted by a thought that occurs after seeing the sign. Using the classic example of a S-T-O-P sign, which needs a secondary thought, known as the “interpretant” – to know that this octagonal sign with large white letters on it means one should stop. In sum, the basic theory stands on a triadic relationship in which something is interpreted in relation to an action; or to put it another way, we need to deliberately identify the steps to how meaning is being made, and of what. All three legs of the triangle inform this meaning-making and are oft effortlessly computed in our split-second, day to day decision making. Employing this theory in the context of interpreting a mascot will allow a thoughtful pause in what it is we actually see, think, feel, and do when interacting with a dynamic symbol, in this case, UVA’s Cavman.

In scouring the literature, I have not seen this theory applied to much, if anything in higher education. There are numerous examples of this framework brought in to examine the nature of God, the usefulness of transcendentalism, or deepen our understanding of metaphysics, and broader philosophical subjects. Peirce is often brought up in comparison to the semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure, who also wrote about signs and differentiated his theory by focusing more on language as a meaning making conduit for a binary system of interpretation (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Peirce’s theory is rarely used outside of semiotics and philosophy, so, with great humility and enthusiasm, I am excited to apply it to my research because I believe its new application to mascots will creatively reimagine the potentials of how we see mascots. Using this lens, I hope to create a new academic way of deconstructing the elements of a collegiate mascot and a new pathway to assessing power and place in the higher education context.

Figure 3

Peirce's Triadic Model of the Sign

1. The *representamen*: the form which the sign takes (not necessarily material, though usually interpreted as such) – called by some theorists the 'sign vehicle'.
2. An *interpretant*: not an interpreter but rather the *sense* made of the sign.
3. An *object*: something beyond the sign to which it refers (a *referent*).

The way in which I plan to bring this conceptual framework to a capstone project in a higher education program is to explore the meaning making and sign forming of Cavman, through the eyes of those interpreting the mascot. Using organizational theory and the triadic model of the sign, the representamen or sign vehicle is the “thing” being explored in this study – the symbol or “bringer of magic.”; clearly, this is the mascot Cavman. The interpretant will be understood through data collection, including probing interviews and discussion over what Cavman means to various groups of people; this will be the vehicle for better understanding the potentials and experiences of the mascot. And finally, the object will be the ultimate outcome or message beyond the actual “thing” or symbol being studied. In this case, one may wonder if the ultimate object connects with the University of Virginia, the feeling of happiness at a sporting event, or whatever else is presented as the outcome of interpreting the mascot.

The Public Good Through Higher Education

Just as one needs to understand the nature of the organization and the semiotics of representation under this conceptual model, one also needs to understand the meaning of “the university as a public good (Marginson, Pusser, et al.). The university system in the U.S. has been organized from its inception as a nonprofit system of public and private institutions, with

the vast majority of enrollments in public, nonprofit institutions. This non-market system evolved to provide education for the nation, individual and community civic and economic growth and affordable access, with protections against potential exploitation and under-investment under market conditions. Above all, education, both elementary and secondary education has been seen as vital to the legitimacy of nations across the globe, and as an essential public good, one that provides education, research and service in the public interest (Marginson, Pusser, Leslie and Johnston, Carnoy and Levin, etc.)

Now Cavman, like all symbols in organizations, reflects mission and purpose. And that mission is itself both symbol and a guide to organizational purpose and behavior. The framework I have presented here will drive my inquiry into better understanding the symbolic impact of a mascot, but perhaps more important, how that symbolic recognition might be turned into intentional activities that contribute to fulfilling the public service mission of the university. While the importance of mascots in student and community engagement in college athletics is witnessed on multiple media outlets every Saturday in the Fall, and during March Madness in the spring, the potential for the mascot to “do good” in the name of the university every day of the year is less well understood. It is with that in mind that I have designed this conceptual framework for the study.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that from all I have gathered, this is one of the only studies that looks at the positivistic public good role of college mascots, with a focus on what they mean to a community outside of controversy. While most research on college mascots examines the problematic challenges of specific mascots throughout history, this study is

vanguard in that it examines the way a mascot can be viewed as a public good and seeks to find a sense of placement in the context of higher education as to what it is, what it means.

The themes and recommendations from this study will hopefully provide better understanding of the ways in which universities signal their purpose, and enlist constituents in that signaling, provide clarity to athletics departments – and also central university leadership and community outreach programs – using this example of the value and role a mascot plays in a university public service mission. Cavman becomes a form of practioner outreach and seeks to answer a problem of practice undergirded in what type of boundary pushing personnel he is a part of. Hopefully, these data will contribute significantly to administrator and program management understanding of the potentials of these programs and where potential growth and expansion could occur in service of the public good. Hopefully it will also provide guardrails and better understanding of the ways in which mascots can be manipulated or directed at potentially negative or self-serving means.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations to this research are connected to the potential uniqueness of the University of Virginia mascot program and the lived experiences of the performers of the mascot and those affiliated with the program. Each school may share overarching similarities as it relates to the administration and performance of a mascot, but there will be specific customs, experiences, rituals, and perspectives only to be owned by this particular mascot – therefore not making it generalizable or transferable. With this study being qualitative and involving a small sample size, the results will not be able to be applied to all schools and all mascot programs, although they could be informational.

The delimitations here involve what I am not choosing to focus on in terms of both the population being studied and research questions being asked. In this particular study, I am not inquiring about race-based or historical perceptions of mascots, looking beyond one university's mascot program, or focusing on the selection process of the mascot performers.

Chapter II

Literature Review

What is the mascot? Where is there literature on mascots? What is performance? What is the public good? Everyone has their own perspective on what a mascot means to them but as Baranko writes, “a mascot is more than just a mascot; it is a symbol of the university and something that students can identify with even after graduation (Baranko, 2011, page 8). Mostly associated with sports and organizational identity, mascots are intrinsically tied to the narrative of most every sporting team. In my review of the literature, I will look at not just the impact and role of the mascot in higher education, but additionally how it fits in the business world both locally and globally. In higher education, most research related to mascots has focused on the problematic elements of what they represent and the difficult history they stir up, notably around cultural appropriation and the dredging of confederate legacies tied to organizations of schools. Finally, the mascot couched in the context of examining public goods will conclude the ways in which mascots are examined.

Mascots can be problematic

There are many schools that have endured prolonged controversy by having a Native American mascot, often represented by an Indian chief, tribe name, or slang term for Native

American (Bohanon, 2020) These mascots typically have history within the school or organization and have experienced a cultural reckoning around misappropriation. We see these examples in college athletics mainly with challenges to names from “Chiefs” and “Fighting Sioux” and in professional sports of “Indians” and “Redskins” (Endres, 2015). Each instance of a name change (Hofmann, 2005) discussion brings to light the hurtful elements of the kinds of harm a mascot is bringing to a community and why mascots are injurious in the eyes of the community (Freng & Willis-Esqueda, 2011). In most cases, a transition to a new mascot name is distant in theme from the old mascot name and rooted in an attempt to provide a crowd sourced, community-based alternative. In the case of the Cleveland Indians name change, there were over 1200 community submissions that were part of a large project, resulting in a name that was specific to a local pair of statues on a bridge near the stadium. (Shapiro, 2021) The runner up in this project was the original name of the Cleveland baseball club – the Spiders – which was from 1890 (2021). In both cases, the names were rooted in team history but show no thematic congruence to the Indian and were viewed as non-controversial choices. These choices were often made in the open, with public opinion feedback, and connected to community buy-in settling on a sensible new choice.

In many other instances, a mascot is representative of the harmful legacy of the Civil War and subsequent elements of racism that are associated with the Confederacy. In these cases, mostly representative of Southern schools, we see names like “Rebels” and “Southern Sam” – some including likeness to the Confederate flag or colors associated with the southern cause (Bever, 2011). These mascots are represented by their sympathizers as being representative of their culture and community, not symbols or signs of hate (DeLap, 2013). Advocates against the continued use of these mascots categorize them as vestiges of a time and place that convey

sympathies to the southern cause. These mascots are often discussed in the same milieu of confederate Civil War naming and memorial representations (Tichavakunda, 2022). They are met with condemnation, defense, and some form of reckoning. These mascots become the subject of proxy battles in culture wars and teeter on generational divides. Most instances of confederate mascots have been eliminated, particularly since the protests motivated by the killing of George Floyd and America's more recent cultural reckoning with race (Chang, 2020). However, the legacy of what a mascot represents in the context of a university's complicated racial history is worth exploring. In the case of the University of Virginia, it is impossible for the symbol of the mascot to not be fully separated from a troubled history dating back to 1817 of the University being built by enslaved laborers (History: Memorial to Enslaves Laborers 2024). While the representamen of the Cavalier is not tied to its university's founding, the pairing of both university and mascot means they each carry each other's weight and baggage. So, to a community member in Charlottesville who is aware of the history and/or has experienced displacement and discrimination by the University of Virginia, any symbol of it – including one of the most visible ones in its mascot – cannot be uncoupled from a potentially troubling interpretation (VCIJ, L. 2023).

There are of course, other examples of cultural misappropriation like what has been explored in the Irish misappropriation of Notre Dame's Fighting Irish leprechaun mascot. (Conley & Hawkins, 2015). Here we see a likening of the mascot to that of underrepresenting populations with an "othering" of them through cultural imperialism. Most similar administrative recommendations in literature typically follow a vote to remove the problematic mascot, as has been done at both the University of Illinois and the University of Mississippi (Conley & Hawkins, 2015).

Here we also find an imbalance in gender representation of mascots, with an overwhelming majority of university mascots being represented as male. There is some debate over exact numbers, but the large majority remain male with roughly only 16 of the 134 FBS schools having female mascot representation (College Football Every Day, 2020). Most of these female mascots represent a secondary mascot addition and not the primary mascot (Montclarion Sports, 2016). In speaking with female student athletes, there has even been research about how poorly designed and imagined these feminized mascots are when introduced, with a sample of female student athletes reflecting on how poorly these overly feminized mascots represent their sport (Rickabaugh, 2019).

Mascots can be real (animals)

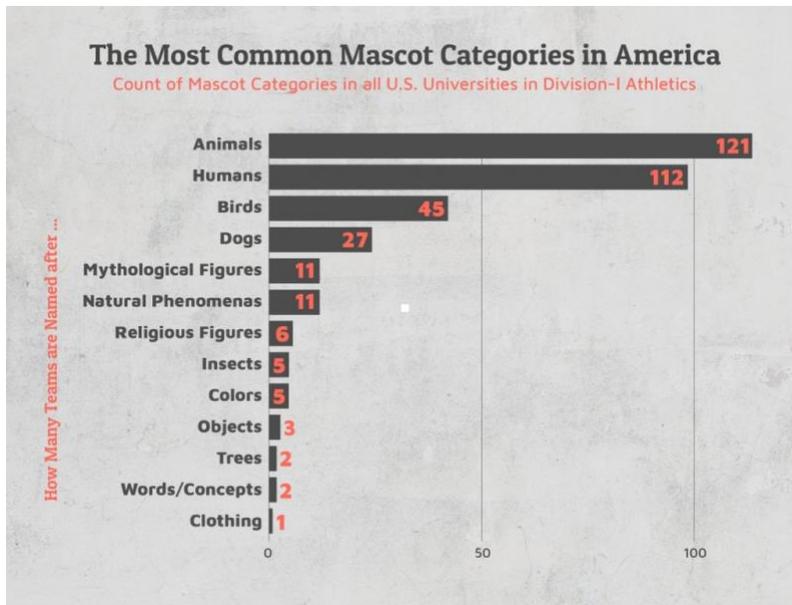
In the landscape of mascot literature, there is a small focus on the roles that live, real animals play in representing mascots. This obviously only refers to schools represented by an animal, as in some cases, there is a non-human performer in the form of an actual dog or cougar or eagle (Bennett & Thompson, 2016). In these instances, literature focuses on the how a live animal often can serve as a platform for preservation for that particular animal. The focus is not on the performer but squarely on the animal and what it means as an icon to their broader species and its often-tenuous position in a delicate, human controlled ecosystem (Payne et al., 2013). In the case of the Houston Cougars, there is an exhibit in the Houston Zoo that houses the “current and former” cougar mascot, informs the community about animal rights and preservation of cougars in the wild, and provides further ways to both support and learn more about the cougar (Reyes & Stipes, 2023). Here in this instance, the cougar, as mascot with local partnership and

university connections, serves the broader community with engagement and activism around the animal (Baltz & Ratnaswamy, 2000).

In other university examples, the animal is used for direct educational purposes and broader exposure at the games they attend. In the cougar example, the cougar obviously does not attend the football games for clear public safety issues. But in the case of the Yale bulldog, the Boston College eagle, and the Colorado buffalo, these animals are present at the games and serve as non-human, non-anthropomorphic mascots (Baranko, 2011). They are more symbolic than practical – ie. they do not hype up the crowd directly through kinetic behavior – but they are experienced as both novelty and token of the collegiate cultural milieu. They cannot talk or really even be fully controlled. They often are part of short, television spots for sports coverage – and usually spend some amount of time on the sidelines of games, mostly just football. They “perform” by simply *being*, and occasionally, will do some stunt or trick like an eagle flying around the stadium or a horse running across the field. Baranko (2011) writes about how over the years, Animal Welfare Act laws have been broken due to the mistreatment of animals acting as mascots and that schools and animal rights organizations are in tension over how these symbols are cared for. Mike, the LSU tiger mascot, has been repeatedly “zapped” to make the tiger roar louder and cheerleaders have been known to dance on its cage – in addition to just the mere presence of a tiger being inside a stadium being a major public risk according to the US Dept. of Agriculture (Baranko, 2011). This phenomenon of real animal representation is contextualized in the broader landscape of mascots being predominantly represented as animals (Grand Canyon University, 2018).

Figure 4

Common Mascot Categories Among Division I Athletics



(<https://www.gcu.edu/blog/gcu-experience/unmasking-mascots-analysis-ncaa-mascots>, 2024).

Mascots can be money makers

Mascots are very much entrenched in the marketing and branding aspect of both higher education, and any organization or event that chooses to have a mascot. These mascots are monetized, commercialized, and built into the fabric of revenue generation at organizations. Even in the case of the NBA, a mascot performer can make upwards of \$650,000 a year just to perform the role – as evidence by the Denver Nuggets mountain lion performer (Rasmussen, 2023). The high salary is justified by the sale of mascot-related products like stuffed animals, apparel, and items representing the likeness of the mascot. There is not formalized data on the overall financial impact of mascot sales at universities, but they represent profitable product lines that add bottom line growth to a school or university. Diem (2016) notes this growth and revenue generating opportunity in college sports, with “collegiate trademark licensing evolving from a \$100 million enterprise in 1981 to a nearly \$5 billion industry in 2012” (p. 251). Data can be found on the value of a mascot in context of an event (Olympics, World Cup, etc.) or a new

mascot being added to the ecosystem of a broader school or team's identity, as with the Philadelphia Flyer's introduction of "Gritty" – who generated an estimated \$162 million worth of exposure in its first month (Howard, 2019).

For decades, the Boston Red Sox did not have a mascot. Then in 1997, they introduced a green monster, aptly named "Wally" who performed in the traditional ways in which a mascot performs at sporting events (Carey, n.d.). The "Wally the Green Monster" brand expanded to kids clothing, hats, stuffed animals, and even a kids' club. Experiencing success, Wally eventually welcomed a new sister named "Tessie" – expanding a girl/female centric product line, opening up a market to younger girls who were attending Red Sox games (Wally the Green Monster's Sister Tessie Is Coming to Boston, 2016). Compared to not introducing a mascot, the broader brand and revenue-based value of these two mascots can be measured in both financial profit and additional brand strength. But it comes with stewardship and responsibility of the brand additions.

The valuing of brand strength extends outside of the role of sports mascots and firmly extends into mascots building value for products, causes, and campaigns. The not-for-profit Ad Council famously claims the "Smokey the Bear" and "Scruff McGruff" as both mascots and brand signifiers for the causes of forest fire prevention and crime, respectively (The Ad Council, 2021; National Crime Prevention Council, 2024). Commercial products from breakfast cereals and cleaning products to maple syrup and butter all have associated characters that often take mascot form at trade shows and public events, but more commonly serve as brand signifiers (De Luce, 2019). Undergirded in the economics of both brand signification and commercial positioning is an understanding that these likenesses are meant to contribute to market value growth – whether that is bottom line profit or fundraising and awareness related to a cause. In

pockets of business research, commercial brands are 37% more likely to increase market share, and 30% more likely to increase profit after introduction of a mascot than are brands that do not have mascots (Royal Examiner, 2021). This is largely indicative in the retail and commercial spaces, where products compete on shelves and in traditional marketing, with less focus in the tech world or online sector.

In higher education literature, academic capitalism doesn't quite properly provide a critique of the commodification of higher education, a stripping down of its parts with values assigned as a market driven commodity (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). However, academic capitalism can suggest a lens at the high level, that takes the higher education experience -- with the mascot sharing a unique position as both product and part -- and much more deeply connects it to the ethos of the school. Perhaps a stronger critique here is from Rooksby, who suggests an increase in many colleges' appetite for owning more intellectual property, licensing deals, and individualized ownership for an increased revenue share (Rooksby 2016). This becomes even more clear with how mascots are trademarked, owned, branded, and licensed commodities in a university setting – with legal ramifications if misused (*Frequently Asked Questions - Trademarks – Syracuse University*, n.d.). All told, the mascot is a heavily protected asset and brand signifier in a tightly constructed, higher education marketing and legal apparatus.

Mascots can be dynamic performers

There is a kinetic art to the mascot, involving the expression of how the mascot is performed. With this understanding, comes supporting literature on what types of gestures, movement, and communication typically happens when a person is performing underneath the suit and costume. This is evidenced in curricula on the performance side of the mascot through

programs like “Mascot Bootcamp” (Raymond, n.d). Here, we see trainers focus on tangible skills sets like “non-verbal and dance guides” along with “physical performance and safe performance guides.” These are common for mascot performers to attend for professional development and are held annually across the United States like typical trade conferences. Training in this niche field suggests a deeper understanding of more obscure, long-standing artforms like miming – which specifically focuses on on-verbal communication being the critical element to knowing not just “what” is being performed is, but “how” (Lippe et al., 1976). The art of the mascot is in the mascot being communicator and conduit of its symbolic importance in a community. Using only hand gestures, with a static facial expression of a mask, there are limitations (and rules) in terms of how a mascot can communicate. Most schools, like Regis University, have a manual that articulated the brand origin story, personality, and very distinctive details on how a mascot should act in all ways (Regis University, 2019). In the case of Regi the Fox, Regis’s mascot, there is a guideline for posing, gesturing, and how to non-verbally make standard responses to common questions (p. 4). These are standard and used for most NCAA professional mascot programs (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Standard Responses for Regi, From the Regis University Mascot Manual

Standard Responses

Regi and wranglers frequently receive the following questions from community members. We list those common questions and guidance for their appropriate responses.

Who is Regi? Who's in there? Who are you?

It's Regi! *Point to name tag*

Are you a girl/boy?

Regi prefers not to affiliate with male and female gender identities. *Look down at waist, look up, shrug*

What does the fox say?

Foxes make lots of sounds, but Regi is the quiet type. *Beckon close and pretend to "whisper" in the person's ear*

Can you talk?

Regi doesn't speak. *Shrug, shake head, put hand to mouth to "speak"*

Can I take a photo?

Yes, absolutely! *Beckon close, open arms, gesture a camera, strike a pose*

Other

When in doubt, a shrug is always acceptable. Look to your wrangler to answer questions.

In most cases, while talking through the mask is possible, it is not part of the standards and codes of how most mascots are asked to perform. Speaking, in the performer's own distinct voice, takes away from the universality of the mascot and signals to the receiver of the communication that this symbol is actually a 19-year-old girl or 37-year-old man. This ends up being accounted for in most manuals with a section focused on "manners" (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6

Mascot manners for Regi, from the Regis University mascot manual

Mascot Manners

1. Those who don the mascot costume must remain approachable and friendly. They must be able to embody Regi's personality while personifying the mascot.
2. Regi does not talk (except privately to the wrangler).
3. Regi should never touch community members without permission.
4. Those who wear the mascot suit must avoid stunts that may endanger themselves or damage the Regi costume.
5. No one may attempt to lift the mascot.
6. **BIG, simple** gestures are encouraged including high fives (hold fox hand up and let person give you their high-five), shaking head up and down, dancing, waving, etc.
7. Regi likes to show her high energy by skipping alongside students and exaggerating nonverbal communications and gestures.

Research in non-verbal communication has roots in American sign language as well as theater arts (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services et al., 2014.) In the case of ASL, there are certain hand gestures and ways to communicate that are borrowed from the deaf community along with the art of miming being strongly present in how a mascot performer uses their hands to signal various communications (Appleseed Media Group, 1995). Lastly, there is a kinetic performative art to what a mascot does, from dancing to falling down, to acting in a funny way that is important to the way in which the mascot is received. This role parallels the function of old-fashioned vaudeville performers, where in silent films, verbal communication was not possible (Gebhardt, 2017). We can receive this often as “the goof” who is there for our entertainment, which harkens back to Buster Keaton films (Rapf & Green, 1995), but also, even further back to the traditional role of the court jester in a royal court. The court fool or jester's function was to entertain the court, especially the king or queen (Andersson, 2023) “Jesting,” as Holcomb (2001) refers to it, was ingrained in the English wit and humor – often with a jester's

primary responsibility being entertainment and merriment – and we see a similar understanding of the mascot in a similar vein in modern culture.

It's also the case that, in the performance of the mascot, there are many times when the “jester” perspective is an inappropriate identification, as the mascot can be asked to perform more solemnly. In cases like ribbon cutting ceremonies, the performance of a mascot is more subtle and performing the mascot is just “being” the mascot. Here, we see the role take on a different form in terms of representational presence and symbolic value. This type of appearance or experience is more akin to a king or head of state attending an event, representing the government or the symbolic value associated with it – as evidenced by the example of the Seton Hall pirate mascot, with a tiered approach to mascot requests: non-profit, weddings, special events, ribbon cutting, and corporate appearances. (Pirate Mascot appearance request, n.d.).

Figure 7

Seton Hall pirate mascot appearance request guidelines

Pirate Mascot Appearance Request

Although he's very busy at Seton Hall, The Pirate enjoys making special appearances at lots of events, like birthday parties, reunions, corporate events, charity events, fairs, festivals, and more. If The Pirate comes to your special event, you can be sure it'll be fun, exciting, and memorable. Please give The Pirate at least 30 days advance notice for your event. If your request is under 30 days in advance, please contact marymargaret.miller@shu.edu

COST FOR BOOKING

- **Non-Profit Organization Appearances**
\$100 — up to 30 minute appearance. Non-game day only.
Proof of non-profit status is required. Any event held outside of South Orange will include a travel fee assessed by our business office.
- **Weddings and Special Events**
\$200 (up to 50 guests)/ \$250 (50+ guests) — up to 30 minute appearance. Non-game day only.
Event can start no later than 9:30 PM. Any event held outside of South Orange will include a travel fee assessed by our business office.
- **Corporate Appearances**
\$300 — up to 30 minute appearance. Non-game day only.
Any event held outside of South Orange will include a travel fee assessed by our business office.

Note: Your fee is partially tax deductible. Additional details will be provided in your receipt.

Carrying the weight of the crown or the state, the mere act of showing up is performing the duties of the role. For a mascot in certain situations, performing is enduring the weight of history and presence, nothing more.

Mascots can be public goods

What is a public good ¹and who owns it? Public goods are defined in finance as commonly shared commodities that enhance the experiences of members in an arena. They are without rival and are non-excludable (Chin, 2021). In the context of education, Marginson examines higher education producing private benefits -- and posits a more global, contested and politicized redefining of public character (2011). This may take the form of producing a more strengthened democracy and cohort of educated global citizens.

Figure 8

Chin's (2021) Taxonomy of Goods



Note: Goods listed are examples; this is not an exhaustive list.

¹ Definitions:

Public Good: a benefit or service that is non-rivalrous and non-excludable (Samuelson 1954).
Public Interest: the welfare of society, the common good (Bell, D., & Kristol, T. 1965).

In terms of public goods aside from education, many have assigned value, like water and electricity, but they are available democratically and with stewardship of some form of leadership. In higher education, Nixon (2012) argues “higher education should be a manifestation of the public good and the means by which the idea of the public good and its implications for cultural, economic, personal and social well-being are conceptualized and actualized through a process of reasoning together” (p. 11). Tilak (2018) argues that “public goods generate a large quantum of externalities, simply known as social or public benefits. Public goods are available to all equally” (Tilak, 2018). There is an ongoing debate over where higher education sits in the framing of being a public good, and how institutions either are public goods or serve them. Pusser (2006) argues for a broader, evolving aperture widening of how higher education is a public good where debate and discussion can richly occur in a “public sphere.” Lararee further emphasizes that the public good through education is inescapable, as our society is deeply shaped by the education of individuals, and by the collective levels of education in a given context (2000).

Both the process and product of a college experience can produce public good outcomes with mascots being a definitive manifestation of the cultural arena. A mascot is maintained by the host organization or school, but anyone may choose to see the mascot as their mascot, should they prescribe to the value sets or interests it represents. Therefore, we see literature pointing towards a collective shared ownership stake in the success and responsibility for anything in the public good sphere –somewhat outside the control of what Pusser (2006) refers to as “a contest...of private or market interests and the state.” (p. 20). Anything that becomes part of the political arena, with multiple stakeholders and competing interests in terms of direction and scope, will see a focused attention and ownership stake in its role. A good example in higher

education that serves the public good is the stated missions and deliverables of Land Grant Universities, with a service-oriented mission to the polis directed by the Morrill Land Grant Act (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018). However, there is great debate over what makes a public good, with Marginson (2018) arguing that “systems vary in the extent to which they produce education or research as private goods in the economic sense of market goods” (322). Slaughter and Leslie (1997) worry that higher education is moving far too much away from its assumed public good role and becoming more just in orientation to their public goods, edging towards “techno-science” and becoming overly capitalistic.

Following this thread, others argue that the utility of the mascot extends far beyond “school spirit,” and that it’s a multi-layered utility, can be a source of public good, or a revenue-generating commodity in a post-secondary organization (Carbone, 2022). The understanding of what they are will hopefully be advanced in this study. It can be argued that there is a special magic in college mascots, who they are, what they do, and how they serve both tactically and symbolically as they serve a public good purpose.

In light of this better understanding of service, whether we see a citizen examining what to do with a controversial statue in a public park or a resident bringing to public comment whether fluoride should be added to the community water supply, there will never be full agreement on direction or a shared understanding on political and philosophical definitions (CDC, n.d.). As it all relates to mascots, we have unpacked more about the nature of mascots and how they carry a rich and complicated history – from symbol to brand, ephemeral and on trial. We have come to see in their nature remains a broader, bridging purpose – to embody and manifest a spirit of an organization, school, product, or place – and to be soul, seller, and sacred all at once. Their purpose in higher ed is both communal and commercial, wide ranging as a

commodity and a chameleon. Examined as a public good in higher education, it meets the broader definition put forth as a communal benefit, but it is complicated by its historical symbolic values and targeted potentials on how mascots are currently used to generate goods. To some, they are evil reminders tied to the past, others adore them as dynamic manifestations of their broader arena they inhabit. Or to others, they exist solely to make money. The mascot is good, bad, and everything in between throughout history – with keen attention to what it could be, what it should be going forward in American higher education.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

The way I approached answering my research questions was through building a case study focused on Cavman, providing a document analysis and conducting a series of semi-focused interviews with past performers of the Cavman mascot and those involved with the coordination, administration, and enjoyment of public service events that draw upon the mascot – essentially, the performers, planners, and receivers of Cavman.

A case study is the methodology I used for my research as it allowed the encapsulation of the most dynamic way to tell the story of the Cavman in a public service role. In support of this method, Feagin et. al states the “quintessential characteristic of case studies” is when a person doing the research seeks to understand “cultural systems of action”, referring to roles being examined (p. 4). Tellis writes that the case study method brings attention to those without voices and those without power (1997). In the instance of the Cavman, this is literally no voice. A case, in order to avoid too many objectives or something that becomes overly generalizable, must be timebound, and coupled with place or activity (Creswell, 2018). Tellis finds a case study to be often used in education and “can serve as helpful vehicles by which to deepen both the perspectives of the novice learner and what the learner understands, regarding the topic that is being explored” (Tellis, 1997, Viera 2023). As a matter of practioner usefulness, a case study in this particular instance allows for the powerful use of mixed methods, creation of a digestible approach with the learner at center, along with a structured outcome that studies a particular phenomenon (p. 126). This case study included document analysis, and the documents that were

analyzed included several articles from Virginia Magazine, in addition to the University of Virginia institutional athletic site, focused on the history and tradition of UVA athletics. The coding strategy for the document analysis incorporated the same codes as the semi-structured interviews.

As essential element of this case study were the interviews. Seidman (2019) states, “Interviewing...is a basic mode of inquiry. Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience” (p. 8). I asked performers not only about the performance of mascots at sporting events, but also probed more specifically into how they understood performances outside of sporting events, what types of roles they played, and captured reactions they experienced. I asked those who were associated or recipients of the mascot performances in athletics and other settings how they perceived the impact and value of the mascot under the university’s mission. Data collection incorporated qualitative data to better understand the stories and experiences of mascot, as well as some descriptive quantitative data on the range and frequency of activities of one prominent mascot program. I examined the role of the mascot as a symbol, which is path dependent and timebound. I sought input on the performers own understanding of the ways in which their role was understood as a public service and a source of engagement. I inquired about the potentials of being a mascot and where the power of the mascot resides, what gives the mascot legitimacy – and how do we maximize public service roles of mascots and their universities.

This led me to be able to make recommendations for the future of university service and contributions to the public good in the U.S. through mascot programs– a reframing of them with an emphasis on their public service role. I hoped this helped transform the way scholarship approaches the mascot and legitimizes its often misunderstood or misdirected place in the

broader narrative of service to higher education and society. As a participant-observer and auto-ethnographer of one mascot program -- and a scholar of higher education, I also hoped to provide original insight into the ways in which those performing as mascots can offer grace, solace, kindness, and the support of one of the most powerful institutions in its community to those in need, support that has the potential to last long after the cheers on the field on game day have gone silent.

Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways does the university mascot serve a public service mission?

RQ2: How do people perceive Cavman and UVA, through the embodiment of Cavman in a service mission?

Research Design

Qualitative research, especially for emerging subject matters, helps to better add to the understanding of a relatively under-researched topic like university mascots. This study will use a qualitative methodology, focused on a document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The approach to qualitative research puts the researcher in the position of an observer, who makes observations and creates descriptions of the environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As part of building a case study, Seidman (2019) explains that “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 160). Interviews are a way to gain deeper knowledge into the experiences of the mascot, both from the performers and administrators of the mascot program over the years.

Interviewing will allow for an examination of many of the individuals who are part of the mascot ecosystem within the university. Seidman (2019) refers to “A phenomenological approach to interviewing focuses on the lived experiences of participants and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 165). Utilizing organizational theory and elements of Peirce’s Theory of Signs – which seems to find meaning in the interpretation – also dovetails with this method. Through these semi-structured interviews, the case study frame provides an ideal vehicle for crafting a complicated research narrative, confirming findings, and finding meaning (Hancock et al., 2021).

Data Collection Protocol

In performance of the interviews, I was purposeful in understanding I must stay objective -- as my positionality, both as a former mascot myself, and member of the President’s Office, could lead to greater subjectivity in the interviewing process. Closely aligning with my conceptual framework, my interview approach will be solely focused on understanding experience, not shaping it.

Participants

I examined all of the historical and journalistic documents associated with the Cavman program, which helped to provide context of the case. There were many available in both UVA historical archives and UVA-related journalistic vehicles from the Cavalier Daily to Virginia Magazine. As it relates to conducting new interviews, I selected subjects through purposive sampling. The participants I spoke with have specific critical insight into this unique experience of mascot programs. Choice for my purposeful sampling followed these criteria:

- past performers of the Cavman mascot

- athletics/university/community affiliates who have experienced or directed the Cavman

My primary sampling group were the performers of the Cavman, as I thought they had the most to share related to their experiences in multiple environments, both sports sporting events and non-sporting events. Looking at current and past performers would give me a longitudinal understanding so that it is not year specific or individual specific. I planned to focus on recent performers of the past 5 years, as memory and experience would be most fresh, but I opened it up to include some compelling cases from many years back, based on strength of relationships.

Sample Size

The population that can reasonably inform my study is approximately ten people. I began with ten stakeholders for my interviews, expecting that within that group there will be a well-rounded cross section who can help provide insight with both the right amount of depth and breadth. I interviewed participants until I achieved saturation, to this end, selecting four past or current performers of the Cavman program, and six current or former university affiliates familiar with experiencing or the administering the Cavman. This is informed with less of a focus on “minimum sample sizes” and more of a “researcher’s judgment on reasonable coverage” of what is the presumed phenomenon. (Marshall et al., 2013). There have been few other studies where a reasonable understanding of the programmatic experience of mascots has been probed, but my expectation was that saturation can be achieved. As part of this process, I reviewed all of the journalistic and historical documents that exist regarding the history of the Cavman as well.

Access

I gained access to the participants first by notifying the athletics department and President's Office, to which I am a member – this is not for permission, but situational awareness of the interviewing that will be taking place and generating from my work. I submitted to the UVA IRB office and once that was approved, I emailed those I choose to target for my interviews. I reached out over email and setup interviews over Zoom. I ensured confidentiality by keeping names and data confidential, in line with IRB best practices and what was agreed upon in my IRB process.

Data Collection Instrumentation

I interviewed the participants once, with questions informed by my conceptual framework, *public good* literature, and the two research questions as my north star. The interviews were all over Zoom and took place in the winter of 2025. As noted earlier, the interview questions probed each interviewee on their analysis of what it was like to be the Cavman, what was the experience, and examining impact from the perspective of the Cavman and those that received him. From the conceptual framework, some questions connected with organizational theory and semiotics models on 1.) the sign (mascot), 2.) the object (UVA), and 3.) the interpretant (audience/performer), all in the spirit of understanding the attempts in “reading” or interpreting the sign.

I record each interview through Zoom, with backup recording on the Voice Notes function of my iPhone; and Zoom Live Transcript immediately transcribed the interviews, with I subsequent coded; there were two interviews that took place over the phone and Otter AI transcribed those two interviews. I collected relevant demographic data from the participants

and assign confidential naming conventions for the one current Cavman I interviewed who wished to remain confidential. I assumed him the the pseudonym “Jay.” All of the data, interviews, and information was stored on my password protected laptop computer to ensure confidentiality.

Data Organizations

During all of my interviews, notes were taken on my computer along with recording on my iPhone or via Zoom. I occasionally checked on the technology during the process to make sure it is working but devoted most of my attention to the participant, while recording relevant observations throughout the process as notes. I stored these notes on my password protected UVA Box account, and all interviews were exported as an .mp3 file as well and transcribed. When each transcription was complete, I began the coding process. In keeping with best practices, I took notes throughout the interview too and kept a journal with notes after each interview (Opdenakker, 2006).

While I would've personally liked all of these interviews to be in person, managing the schedules and expectations of the participants necessitated Zoom, which has become the standard bearer for many conversations in a post-COVID age. I believe the quality of the conversation did not suffer.

Data Analysis

I double checked the clarity of the statements and experiences in the interview, as evidenced in best practices for data management. (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). The way in which I coded these interviews was through my conceptual framework: rooted in organizational theory and

relevant lenses based on Peirce's Theory of Signs. This progression is supported by identifying patterns with the data and developing a code set with the lenses (Sgier, 2012).

Categorization and Coding

Coding is an important and fundamental way to make meaning of qualitative research data. I planned on building out a coding process that uses interpretive phenomenological techniques to make cogent meaning of the interviewees and also my own interpretations of them as well. Inductive and deductive techniques were used, and the framework for the coding was rooted in my conceptual framework, which fundamentally allowed me to structure the patterns and themes on the basis of organizational theory (myth, symbols, organizational symbols) and Peirce's triad: the sign, the object, and the interpretant – with an additional element exploring characteristics of the public good. These concepts helped me to provide an analytic approach to the interview data sets and make meaning from the conversations. An exact application of this coding process and technique was also applied to my document analysis, rounding out the same coding process for interviews and documents.

The first lens I wanted to understand was how each interviewee understood what the mascot was and meant to them; this is one triad of Peirce's theory of understanding the "sign." Each individual will have a unique and different understanding of the value of the mascot and what it is. Here I asked basic, open-ended questions like "What is a mascot? Or who is Cavman?" I connected this too, with Bolman and Deal and Meyer and Rowan's organizational theory around symbols and signs, their meaning in organizations. These were followed by positing a secondary lens of incorporating Peirce's analysis of the "object" that the sign represents, looking at how the object is interpreted and communicated through the sign. In this

case, it will be how Cavman represents UVA, what roles or potentials does he inhabit and where are places for growth. The last lens implementing Peirce's theory was around the interpretant, which was dual in better understanding the experiences of the audience from lived interactions or anecdotal stories. Here I analyzed how the mascots see themselves, how non-mascots see the mascots, and what this all means in terms of representing the object in the University of Virginia. Additionally, my final question looked at literature on understanding the public good and seeking to find the interviewee's sense of the Cavman being explored in the context of what is the purpose of a public good in higher education. I hoped to get a better understanding of whether the mascot is interpreted as a public good and why or why not. These questions all remained aligned and examined through the lens of the conceptual framework as well, looking at the organizational theory associated with Cavman's role in the ecology of the UVA/community orbit.

Validity

I made sure all of the transcriptions were accurate and had no errors. I offered my participants the option to review or clarify any questions around anything that may seem uncertain. As this process completed, I double checked transcriptions and notes, and then moved on to build out codes and categories for my data.

Trustworthiness

I endeavored to maintain the highest degree of trustworthiness with several checks in place for my research; with my research being fairly new, I had to set strong standards for how participants were chosen, goals for the interviews, and be clear on the method of the overall

research. Elo et. al (2014) would argue for a definitive description with a focus on accuracy in order to ensure trustworthiness. Continuing, Elo et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of alignment between the research goals and the data and participants, important in establishing credibility. I casually offered member-checking as well, which made this research potentially more broadly applicable and added to its trustworthiness – but none of the participants took me up on the offer.

Researcher Positionality

Exploring the positionality of a researcher is incredibly important when conducting data collection, especially qualitative data collection. I deeply reflected on my own position as a white male administrator working in the President’s Office – but more importantly to this study, as my introduction states, I was also a former college mascot. While my experience was very different than most, as I performed almost exclusively at non-sporting events during COVID, I shared experiences -- and did my best to prevent biases when talking to others associated with the mascot program.

I believe that my experience as a former college mascot – performing Cavman at the University of Virginia -- both initiated, and now enhances, my understanding of this research – but at the same time, it could’ve possibly biased some of my perceptions. I endeavored to eliminate any perceptions or thinking that might cloud judgment on the research subjects or coding analysis. I hoped my positionality, which is quite entrenched, also added value without skewing or detracting from the validity or transferability of the data collection and analysis.

Additionally, as the researcher who has also been a performer of the mascot, I had to set aside my own biases from the lived experience and was sure not to have any of my experiences

cloud the way in which I understand and interpret the experiences of the other performers I interviewed. Without discipline, this could've hover near research bias and might have distorted effects on the data collection.

Chapter IV:

Results

The Case for Cavman at the University of Virginia

The University of Virginia, founded in 1819 by Thomas Jefferson, is “a public university designed to advance human knowledge, educate leaders and cultivate an informed citizenry.” (About the University, 2025) It is located in Charlottesville, Virginia with a mission statement dedicated:

To (a) founding vision of discovery, innovation, and development of the full potential of talented students from all walks of life; (serving) the Commonwealth of Virginia, the nation, and the world by developing responsible citizen leaders and professionals; advancing, preserving, and disseminating knowledge; and providing world-class patient care (Mission Statement, 2024).

According to President James E. Ryan’s 2030 Strategic Plan, this work takes the form of the University being “a great and good university; outstanding and ethical, excellent for a purpose.” (A Great and Good University, 2019). We see this public service mission of the University of Virginia present in patient care, community service, promotion of democratic values, breakthrough research and in the striving to be accessible and affordable for citizens of the Commonwealth and the world. This case study will look to see how this mission manifests in the UVA mascot – a lineage from two frat house dogs, a sequence of student swashbucklers on

and off horseback, an ill-fated orange creature, to a costumed, large headed Cavalier, officially named Cavman in 2000. What good is he?

This is his story.

Overview

There is very little if any research on the positive, pro-social and mission understanding of college mascot programs. Most of the research with college mascots is limited to negative depictions and cultural misappropriation or troubled legacy elements. The purpose of my qualitative case study is to add a new perspective into mascot literature and seek to examine the broader ways a mascot serves a university community, and how a wide range of people think about the role of a mascot. Employing a conceptual framework that draws from organizational theory – Meyer and Rowan and Bolman and Deal – along with buttressing from Peirce’s semiotics theory on signs – this qualitative case study focuses on important themes rooted in the theory and derived from the interview data.

The seven key themes that emerged from the conceptual framework, with data sourced from ten semi-structured individualized interviews center on how mascots connect, strengthen, inspire, tell story, seek soul, understand, and make meaning. The findings and analysis that you will read below track the experiences of insiders and outsiders of the Cavman program, current and former Cavman performers and managers, community leaders, fans, and administrators both at the hospital and university level. It will hopefully paint a full picture that addresses these two research questions:

RQ1: In what ways does the university mascot serve a public service mission?

RQ2: How do people perceive Cavman and UVA, through the embodiment of Cavman in a service mission?

Who is part of this new research? With the exception of one secret, current Cavman performer (“Jay”) whose identity cannot be revealed until graduation, all of my participants waived their right to anonymity and allowed me to write this case study with open and direct references to real names, roles, and open focus on the University of Virginia as subject matter, with its mascot “Cavman” in full spotlight.

Each interview was conducted through Zoom (8) or through a phone call (2), with Zoom Live Transcription or the other University approved transcription service (Otter AI) functioning as my data collection. I had forecasted my interviews to last 60 minutes, but found most questions and content was covered in around 30 minutes, with two of them lasting less time due to time restraints on the call due to their job, all leading to 167 pages of single-spaced transcription text. After all interviews were complete, I took an emic approach to coding and re-read all of the interview data, highlighting in the Word document the salient themes, words, and ideas that emerged. After each transcription was analyzed, I would sit with the data and then created a separate document with coding journal notes related to each interviewee’s responses. Here I would pull quotes, type in thematic words, and then with each person, provide a paragraph analysis on how I interpreted their answers. All of the data was gathered using two slightly different, IRB approved Interview protocols: one specifically tailored to those who wore the Cavman suit, and one specifically tailored for those who did not. All of the questions sat under the tent of my conceptual framework that borrowed from organizational theory and

semiotics theory on signs. Here were my specific participants, with brief yet salient notes on each:

Table 1

Role of Participants in Research Study

Name	Role	Field Notes
Anna Lee	Former Cavman Mascot	One of few female Cavman performers; only from her cohort
Ben Allen	Former Cavman Mascot	Current Executive Director of UVA Equity Center; triple Hoo
Truman Brody-Boyd	Former Cavman Mascot	Experienced mascot performance during 2019 National Championship run for basketball
“Jay”	Current Cavman Mascot	Only person in study with pseudonym, currently performing and identity confidential
Dr. Billy Peterson, M.D.	Former pediatric hematologist/oncologist at UVA Children's Hospital.	Experienced Cavman in hospital setting dozens of times
Julie Caruccio	AVP of Student Affairs, UVA	Serves as the other, football-based UVA mascot “Mounted Cavalier” on horse
Kelley Haney	Current Head of Cavman Program	Runs cheer squad and tryouts for Cavman
Kevin Thurman	Former Head of Cavman Program	Also, former mascot performer from previous college
Doris VanderMeulen	UVA women’s basketball fan / county resident	Is not a graduate of UVA; experienced Cavman in athletic and community setting
Juandiego Wade	Mayor of Charlottesville	Representing viewpoint of fan and community member

As I was writing up my interview protocol questions, I knew the raw interview data would help me retune any emergent animation of my conceptual framework. At the core, I saw the pillars of organizational theory + semiotics distilling down my research into categories around the

symbols, signs, experiences, myths, and ceremony related to the theorists' work. Once the data was collected, I investigated further into the definitions of these terms and how exactly their meanings connected to emergent themes. As you can see from the three tables below, there is a clear evolution of the interpretation of the conceptual framework: from protocol framing to broader nomenclature, through a deeper understanding of explaining the elements and terms with greater depth – and then a simplification of my emic coding terms overlayed upon the theories, reframed and colloquialized after all interviews were completed. This framework served me well and has the potential to serve others well when collecting data on symbols in higher education. The three-legged framework allows for a unique approach that employs pre-existing theory in higher education and semiotics. The Meyer and Rowan leg lends itself to helping better understand how symbols connect and strengthen; Bolman and Deal's symbolic leg examines how symbols inspire, tell story, and seek soul. Lastly, higher education theory is buttressed by semiotics literature from Pierce's Triadic Model of the Sign, in providing a three-point approach to meaning making and understanding the symbol in context of the organization and society. This framework presented in the findings by ordering the sentiments and experiences related to Cavman and providing fertile grounds for bridgebuilding pathways to public good and public service analysis. Below is the detailed, iterative evolution of how I came to understand the conceptual framework from the research gathered:

Figure 9 (for reference only; identical to Figure 1)

Conceptual Framework

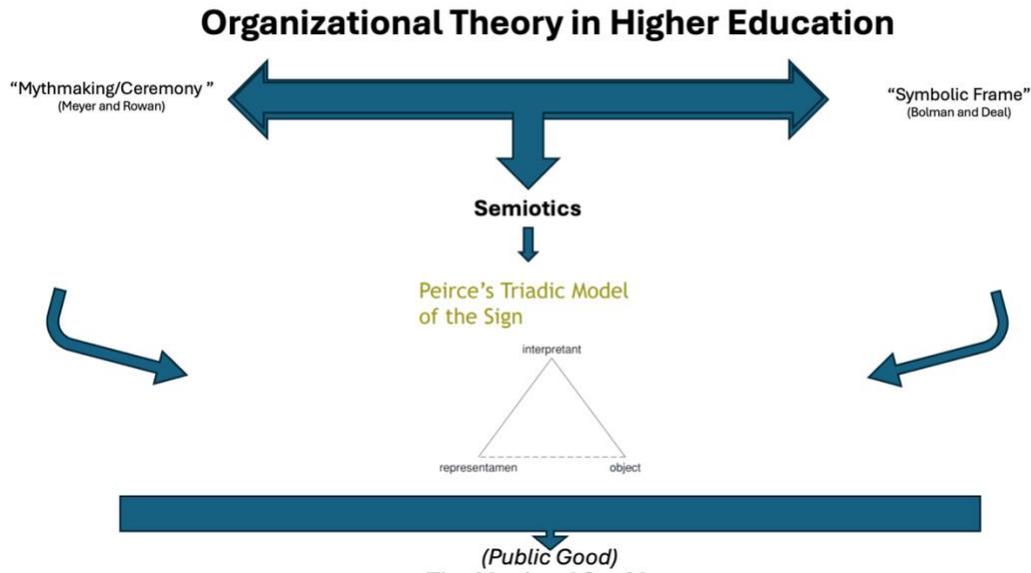


Figure 10

Thematic Findings Aligned with Detailed Conceptual Framework w/ Definitions

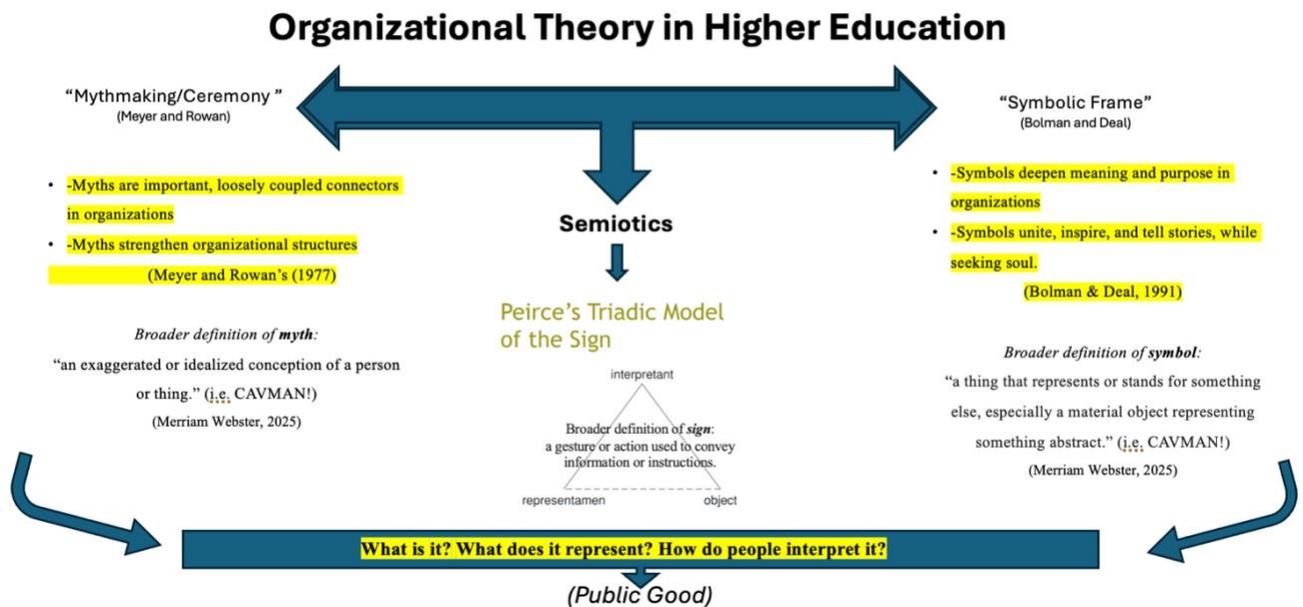


Figure 11

Thematic Mapping on Conceptual Framework



Inspire, Tell Story, and Seek Soul

This pillar of Bolman and Dean’s organizational work focused on their symbolic framework (1991), which draws from earlier work on organizational culture and myth making by Weick (1976), Meyer & Rowan (1977) and Scott (1983). Important themes from this theory state that symbols deepen awareness and purpose in organization, should unite, have the power to inspire, employ storytelling, and seek out a soul in an organization (1991). Under this pillar, the data will show with depth and breadth an array of way in which the Cavman story has inspired, been baked into a broader UVA narrative, and lives in many cases as a spiritual, soulful component to the marrow of the University of Virginia.

Connect and Strengthen

Meyer and Rowan's contribution to the conceptual framework is strongly connected to their research on mythmaking and ceremony, and how it connects to understanding organizations (1977). Related knowledge from this theory revolves around the importance of myths as powerful, connectors in loosely coupled organizations, with myths strengthening organizational legitimacy (1977). Here, we interpret this theory to strongly support the themes around making connection with place and strengthening relationships, both with place and people involved. This section will be instrumental in understanding the wide, cross generational net that Cavman casts both inside and outside the UVA community, including Charlottesville.

Understand and Make Meaning

Lastly, we look at the actual thing: the mascot. What is it, who is it, why is it, who likes it, who wants it? Peirce's Triadic Model of the Sign allows for this analysis through its framework of inquiring: What is the sign? How the sign an object of something? How do people interpret it? (2014). This section will address the lived experiences of the performers and unveil what people think this thing means.

Table 2 documents the themes that emerge from the conceptual framework, with accompanying participant quotes that will lead their respective analysis. Consider the context for these themes to be a broader public sphere of debate, deliberation, and conversation – where we the mascot in the higher education political arena, appealing to public good potentials (Pusser 2006).

Table 2.

Emergent themes related to conceptual framework

Themes from Conceptual Framework	Participant Quote	Aspect of Conceptual Framework
Connect	“I've met so many people at UVA basketball games that I'll go sit down with them, take a picture, and then they'll whisper to me, you know, 30 years ago, I was one of these mascots.”	Org Theory: <i>Meyer and Rowan</i>
Strengthen	“If Cavman shows up, it is literally walking UVA.”	Org Theory: <i>Meyer and Rowan</i>
Inspire	“It was such a boost for these kids...all these kids that were being seen at the children's hospital or in the clinics there you know are going through challenging circumstance. And so, to be able to brighten their day and brighten their experience and attach positivity to that and to that location, it was always really meaningful.”	Org Theory: <i>Bolman and Deal</i>
Tell Story	“(Cavman) can't actually be in your wedding party in a church, but if you want him to be there, we can work through that. Sorry, Cavman can't officiate your wedding.”	Org Theory: <i>Bolman and Deal</i>
Seek Soul	“He looks to celebrate what people are celebrating. He loves to share in people's joy. And I think that's part of what people love about having sharing moments with him is that he's sharing in the exact joy that you're having in that moment.”	Org Theory: <i>Bolman and Deal</i>
Understand	“Oh, it's disgusting...that suit gets hot. And I had put it on after a couple other people had worn it. And so, it collects sweat and it's got a familiar stench to it...”	Semiotics: <i>Pierce</i>
Make Meaning	“I got to meet a million people in the suit that have never met me.”	Semiotics: <i>Pierce</i>

Connect

“I've met so many people at UVA basketball games that I'll go sit down with them, take a picture, and then they'll whisper to me, you know, 30 years ago, I was one of these mascots.”

– “Jay,” current Cavman performer

Across the ten interviews, the theme of “connect” was one of the most salient and prevalent concepts, from those who performed as the Cavman to everyone else who has encountered Cavman. First, the CavMen I interviewed gave many examples of how they first encountered a Cavman performer and how he made them feel. “Jay,” our current working Cavman grew up in Charlottesville and recalls seeing Cavman as a child:

[When I saw Cavman,] it felt like I was lucky when I saw it. I felt connected to UVA a little bit more. I felt like I'm cheering for this sports team, and this sports team is right there with me and, I get to see the Cavman and go give him a fist bump. I feel like it connects me more with the athletes that I'm watching.

Kevin Thurman, former head of the Cavman mascot program had a similar experience in observing the ways older generations of UVA affiliated people responded to Cavman at events”

[The] connection that alums of the university have that it's like, “Oh my gosh. I went to UVA Cavman, like I remember a basketball game in the 70s.” And Cavman came up for our friend group and like instantly a flood of memories come back. And you may not know that in the suit, but the memories that you're creating for people, and also helping flood back for people, is just incredible.

Another rare aspect of both the connection and appeal of Cavman is that they are also inter-generational, Thurman pointed to the anomaly of such widespread appeal in this comment:

It's timeless, too. It's not just like, oh, yeah, only the 18- to 22-year-olds they really can connect with it. The community, the kids in our community connect with it. The students at UVA on grounds connect with the faculty and staff. The number of faculty and staff that get excited about Cavman is incredible. And then the alums, as they come back.

Another connection can be found in the relationship between the mascot performer and the University. The mascot not only connects with the audience, but also with the University, as evidenced in Truman Brody-Boyd's experience: "[Being Cavman] gave me an opportunity to connect with UVA and the UVA community in so many unique ways." For Anna Lee, a former Cavman performer, even trying out for Cavman was a way to better connect with the UVA community after a first year that was affected by COVID:

I didn't go to school my first year because it was COVID. So, I stayed home. Then my second year, I wanted to get as involved as possible. And I knew I... In high school, I was very involved in sports, so I wanted to be involved in UVA sports somehow. So, I saw an Instagram post actually from the Cavman Instagram saying that tryouts were in November of my second year. And I just, on a whim, decided to sign up.

In this case, the opportunity to be the mascot built a connection between a student and the school. Ana found this particularly valuable because of the challenge of finding ways to interact with others during the pandemic.

The wide variety of connections being formed is further evidenced by the sheer volume and array of events at which Cavman has performed over the years. Kelly Donney, current Cavman manager, reflected on receiving roughly two new requests a day from people asking for the Cavman to appear at non-sporting events: "Everybody wants Cavman."

The variety of places and events where the performers interviewed here made appearances is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

List of Places that Cavman has visited from data collection

PLACES CAVMAN HAS VISITED
All UVA sporting events (home and away)
UVA Children's Hospital
Weddings (in town and out of town)
Corporate outings / events
Community parades
VA Governor's Mansion
Disney World
Sear's Tower
Mascot Camp
Children's Birthday Party
Retirement Party
Alumni Hall events

Of course, not every creative performance is received as the artist intends. I would be remiss in not including a few of those moments when Cavman overwhelmed the audience. Local UVA women's basketball fan Doris VanderMeulen previously shared a story observing Cavman trying to connect with her grandson:

I think [her grandson] was a little afraid; the Cavman came over. He seemed a little reticent to go, you know, shake his hand or whatever. Yeah. I think he's scared. I mean, it's a big thing. It's got a big head. It's kind of like a clown. Some kids are afraid of clowns. You know; I've never been able to figure out where his eyes are.

The possibility of Cavman presenting a frightening countenance to some is a challenge addressed early in the training program, as evidenced by “Jay’s” recollection of his Cavman tryout:

Then they give me three songs for about 15, 20 seconds each. And I just have to dance for them. And then four scenarios. So, for example, like Ryan Dunn (former UVA basketball player) has a huge slam dunk, or a UVA kicker misses the tying field goal or like a little kid is scared of Cavman but still wants a photo.

“Jay” knows this feeling from personal experience, as he shared: “When I was young, I was pretty scared of the mascot...” Julie Caruccio, a university administrator who also serves as the mounted (on horseback) cavalier at UVA football games, also commented on the trepidation that Cavman could induce: “Some people that I know were afraid of him. I never had that (as Cavalier).” “Jay” said, “The ones that aren't terrified are really excited and they give you a big hug and it's nice.” While Cavman is not intended to frighten, these anecdotes illustrate the awe and range of impression that a mascot possesses, and the opportunity to use that power for the public good.

Another abiding connection afforded the Cavman performers was finding themselves in an expanded and ongoing community of service. They were enriched with new networks and long-lasting friendships, from mascot camps through passing the costume on to the next in line, and beyond. CavMen noted that the role, and their service in that role, allowed them to form deep and persisting bonds:

Going to mascot camp; I think I went with like the Penn State Nittany Lion, the Syracuse Orange, Colgate Raider, Delaware Blue Hawk or Blue Jay, whatever they are. And you're like putting ridiculous costume, right? And you're like doing all this stuff together. So that was pretty memorable. And it's like, it's interesting, like 20 years later, I'm still

friends with a lot of those folks on Facebook and we all have kids and it's just cool. Like the thing that bonds us together is that we all did a mascot camp one random summer in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Truman Brody Boyd, another former mascot performer also cited the connections and bonds made on his journey as Cavman:

It means that I get to continue to have this permanent connection to several close friends, not only the fellow CavMen of my class years, right, who I'm still in touch with, still text with all the time, still visit. But also, mascots from across the country, right? I'm now like a part of a really cool group of individual mascots from Wake Forest to Virginia Tech to Notre Dame, right? Like I'm in touch with all these people still. We have group chats and all that stuff.

It is also the case that those interviewed who interacted with Cavman cited a personal connection. Connections can be understood in these interviews as something like a multilayered connective tissue that binds performer and community, mascot and community, those who are entertained by the mascot. These multiple and overlapping bonds are characteristics what Meyer and Rowan (1977) deem “organizational connectedness,” a significant contributor to organizational legitimacy.

Strengthen

*“So, I think it makes UVA feel accessible to the community, right?
If Cavman shows up, like it is literally walking UVA.”*
– Julie Caruccio, UVA administrator

Here too, an aspect of Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) framework, strengthening bonds and bringing people and groups closer together continues to be a guiding element for understanding

the University of Virginia Cavman. We see this very clearly in the positive ways in which Cavman takes two groups and makes them stronger through his presence. This section will primarily focus on how he strengthens the relationships between the UVA community and the bonds between the Charlottesville community. Julie Carruccio captured a nice moment of that Charlottesville community strengthening through sporting events and community events:

[Cavman] is a literal embodiment of serving the community, of engaging them, interacting with them, being present with them, inviting them in. That's the whole mascot's job, even though they're silent, is to interact with guests. And so, you know, it's just a very welcoming component when not every part of the university is welcoming in that way.

Mayor of Charlottesville, Juandiego Wade, agrees the Cavman's visits to the community strengthen the relationship between UVA and the local community:

And I think it's just positive; when Cav man is out on the mall or at the school, or whatever, that Cav man is, UVA and that is, it's a big role to play...because it's the when UVA does well, the whole community [does]; like when they go to schools, or if they go to a ribbon cutting for an event, or something like that, that the Cavman is there, it's really, something to kind of amplify.

Juandiego Wade encouraged Cavman to continue to engage with pockets of the UVA community that typically do not experience him outside of sports, like the Southwood neighborhood.² Truman Brody-Boyd called his work in the suit “community-molding and community-uniting.” This was not just the case between strengthening relationships between

² This is a well-known, low-income neighborhoods in the Charlottesville community that does not traditionally engage with UVA and the UVA community, or have many touchpoints with the University.

UVA and Charlottesville, but also within the UVA community, especially with alumni and staff.

Anna Lee remembers a particular event at Alumni Hall:

A lot of times I would go to alumni dinners or just community events for the staff and kids would be there. And then I think like some of these people, like they work for UVA, but they've never been able to interact with Cavman. So this was like a special experience for them to be able to individually take a picture with Cavman or a lot of them would come up and say, "Oh, my daughter's going to love this, like that I got this picture with Cavman" and so a lot of those older people would find it's a special thing for them to show to their kids; show that they're involved. So, I feel like that was special to hear that they wanted to share that moment with their kids.

Kevin Thurman finds a similar thread on why Cavman matters to the community:

I take pride in what this university does and means for our community here in Charlottesville. Having been an employee at the university, I think [Cavman] is an outlet for people to share their love and affinity for the university and share it with others, be like, "Oh, look at this picture of me with Cavman" from the weekend we went to the game. It was so cool."

Kevin estimated that roughly 70% of Cavman appearance occur related to sporting events, with 30% connected more to community, non-sporting events. He shared that he was seeing an increase in corporate sponsorship requests, and Kelley's also reported receiving "2-3 emails a day" from somebody wanting Cavman. Aside from visits to hospitals – which I will explore in greater depth in the next section around "Inspire" – there was little differentiation between the quality of engagement in sporting events and non-sporting community events.

The word “community” came up 92 times across the ten interviews – the second most popular theme, after “love” – and most of those interviewed appreciated the ways in which the Cavman strengthened their affinity, connection, or experience through the mascot. However, this strengthening was contextual, as when Doris VanderMeulen related her reaction to seeing Cavman on the back of a pickup truck during a COVID-era mascot parade. Here was her report:

Well, it was COVID. And so, nobody could go anywhere. So Cavman came out. And I think Cavman was on the back of a pickup truck or something. And the kids were all lined up outside. And even we went out as grownups and whatever. And it was just fun to watch the kids because they were really excited. And everybody's yelling and cheering, and it was fun. It provides a lot of fun. I was interested in watching the engagement of the kids with the Cavman. I didn't feel particularly engaged with the Cavman.

As with the earlier examples of children frightened or confused by the mascot, Doris’s reaction reminds us that the mascot is context specific. Meyer and Rowan’s connecting and strengthening organizational framing help us to better understand the reaction to Cavman in varying perspective, both internal and external. We observe depth and breadth, scale of impact, along with light resistance to Cavman. Moving on to the secondary pillar of the organizational framework, we will shift to Bolman and Deal’s symbolic framework and how it inspires, tells story, and seeks soul.

Inspire

“It was such a boost for these kids...all these kids that were being seen at the children's hospital or in the clinics there you know are going through challenging circumstance. And so, to be able to brighten their day and brighten their experience and attach positivity to that and to that location, it was always really meaningful.”

– Dr. Billy Petersen, former pediatric oncologist at UVA Children’s Hospital

Bolman and Deal posit that a significant part of their symbolic framework of organizational behavior centers on the ability to inspire. This could not have been more apparent in the interviews – as for every Cavman performer and manager of the program – their overall top memory and shared anecdote was related to the time they have spent at the UVA Children’s Hospital. These experiences from performers are supported by an interview with Dr. Billy Peterson, who was the longtime pediatric oncologist at UVA Children’s, and has experienced many Cavman visits. Starting with Billy, we hear more of these inspiring visits:

[UVA Children’s is] going through really hard challenging times, you know, taking care of children that are sick and to have this larger-than-life sort of superhero show up where they’re working really hard every day to make kids’ lives better. It’s sort of like this neat partnership, like, hey, we’re in this together I’m in this with Cavman, you know, helping these kids to make it through this. And I think, yeah, it’s validating.

The interviews reinforced that one of Cavman’s unofficial second homes was UVA Children’s, where Billy explained what he did and how it was received:

Yeah, Cavman was a regular staple, I feel like around the hospital and the clinics always very fun to see Cavman. I remember a couple of different times we made plans to have them show up to different events and you know, kids especially, just always lit up when they saw Cavman. You know, he’s sort of this larger-than-life character. Sort of a celebrity to these kids. They see them on TV. They see them at sports games. And here he is, you know, at my clinic or my hospital, hanging out with me, giving me a high five. And it was such a boost for these kids who are going through something difficult.

I cry every time I recall my own interactions as Cavman with children in need. And I am not alone in experiencing deep feelings about the ways in which a Cavman visit inspires people and lifts them up. Cavman performers all recalled that visiting the children's hospital was seminal in their time in the suit, inspiring others and being inspired as well. "Jay" recalled:

I visited the hospital multiple times and that's probably my favorite thing to do. That's my favorite place to be stationed at. I visited the children's units and radiology and that was the most fun. I understand like not everybody at the hospital, no one at the hospital wants to be there. It's not a place you want to be ever in life. It means something wrong is going on. And they have to go seek care. And so, to be able to go see these children and thank the employees and the workers, it's really valuable because UVA health care system employs so many people. It's massive. And it's nice to be able to go there and thank them and talk to them. And while I can't speak, it is nice to give out a hug or two and going to the children's units.

When asked about what that experience meant to him as a performer, compared to athletics events, "Jay" said:

There's more depth in the role than a lot of people realize, and it's really nice. And I find that people really appreciate it a lot more than I originally expected. To be honest, my first time at the hospital. I thought I was going to get in the way a little bit. And I was a little nervous and I couldn't have been more wrong. People were thrilled. They walked me around. They toured me. I got to meet all sorts of people, took pictures. People were, they were thrilled, calling their family.

Other Cavman performers and managers had equally emotional experiences at the hospital. Kevin Thurman recalled:

You're visiting these sick kids and you see them smile and you see their reactions and the parents reactions and the football players going in there with them and the cheerleaders and that... that moment, that feeling is so much bigger than Cavman -- it's like, wow, you talk about the impact that that has on the life of a person.

An important aspect of my experiences as the interviewer is hard to convey with the written word. I observed long pauses, a subtle loss of composure, and deep emotions from those who talked about the power of these visits and the good intention they represented. Truman Brody-Boyd captured it by saying: "These are the really meaningful moments to be in the mascot suit and where you really get the sense that you're representing something more than when you're at these big sporting events, it's amazing. It's an unrivaled feeling."

Here, we have performers, managers, and hospital administrators all speaking about the power and inspiration accompanying the presence of Cavman. Ben Allen, now on the Board of UVA Children's Hospital, reflected on how being Cavman inspired him as a human being:

So, it's not easy going and seeing like a six-year-old who is terminal, right? But in this moment, they are happy to see you and you've brought them this joy. And so, it's like really this interesting thing that's going on, like you're a human inside of it, but like they're in love with this character and you're having this very human moment.

When Ben and I, both parents and former Cavman performers, were talking about reflecting on these types of experiences, I was reminded again of the many layers of connection and service embodied in the role and the personal lessons of serving as the mascot.

Now all of this isn't to say that the UVA Children's Hospital is the sole source of inspiration for the Cavman program. There were other data that supported inspiring additions to Bolman and Deal's organizational leadership oeuvre, but much of it paled in comparison in

terms of emotionality and impact. “Jay” did recount a heartwarming story about a visit at a basketball game:

I just saw this one kid, he's with his dad. They were in the corner (of JPJ), not great seats, no one nearby. So, I just decided to spend half the game sitting with them. And it was awesome. I don't know if the kid spoke. He didn't speak a ton. If he did speak, he was six, seven years old. Young kid. And he was thrilled. He was so excited. And the dad FaceTimed his wife and the kid's mom and it was awesome. And so, in the fourth quarter, we do a t-shirt toss. And so, I knew he wasn't going to go get one. And so, I always tuck one in my suit and go throw them. And so, I went to him after the t-shirt toss and walk him up a t-shirt.

Mayor Wade experienced something equally meaningful with how long Cavman stayed in his suite during a women's basketball game:

So, we had a lot of young men of color in there. It was a big deal because they had snacks there. And then when the door opened up and Cavman came in there, he was like, you know, he was like, all the kids up, I have to admit, I almost pushed a fifth grader to the ground, I wanted a picture with him, but we all got pictures. He stayed in there. I'm not sure if he was visiting all of the other suites, but he stayed there and made sure everyone got all the pictures they wanted. And you know that was great.

It is in these very human, thoughtful interactions – from sharing a t-shirt with a lonely child, taking pictures with every kid in a box, to the elemental caring for the sick through powerful, silent presence – that we as receivers of the mascot are inspired. Not lost in these moments under the Bolman and Deal symbolic frame are the hybrid components of person inside and mask on the outside contributed to the inspiration. The Cavman alone does not merely inspire – but it is

by his word and deed, action in proper context, that the organization benefits and UVA becomes a more inspiring place for all involved.

Tell Story

“[Cavman] can't actually be in your wedding party in a church, but if you want him to be there, we can work through that. Sorry, Cavman can't officiate your wedding.”

– Kevin Thurman, former manager of Cavman program

Another pillar of Bolman and Deal’s symbolic frame is the importance of narrative and storytelling in communicating a mission and vision. Part of understanding the Cavman in this symbolic frame must include the effusiveness of the stories being told about Cavman, often by a former Cavman performer. It is in these stories that a sense of fun, ebullience, and somewhat whimsical randomness come forward in examining the role Cavman plays in a community. Many of these stories are singular memories for those who experience them, starting with Cavman’s frequent attendance at weddings. Ben Allen remembers:

The wedding was pretty special. I mean, weddings often they're like the most important part of people's lives, right? And so, when you're out there with a bride and groom like dancing, you think about a wedding, they have a special time dedicated for the bride and groom and then there's Cavman, right? And so, to be included in that is just a really special time.

Kevin Thurman recalls a time when Cavman was not just on the dance floor, but in a wedding party:

We've had Cavman be a part of the entrance of the wedding party that they wanted him introduced with the wedding party; that's incredible. How many people you know want that? You know the impact that Cavman has that mascots have at the university level you

talk about that someone wants the mascot to be part of their wedding party introductions, you don't see that in other aspects of life.

Truman Brody-Boyd would even collaborate with other mascots when it came to these appearances:

I was brought out to a wedding in Richmond where they also brought Ramses. The groom was a Hoo, the bride was a ram from UNC, and so a Tar Heel, I should say. And so, we were both there and we like started the dancing after the dinner and after the ceremony. So, it was a total surprise for both the bride and groom. And I knew the Ram that was there because of our work with ACC. And so, we were able to like burst out of a closet essentially at the edge of the dance floor after the dinner concluded and we just like jumped out and got to it. And so, we were able to kickstart the party for these people's special day for their wedding; so you never know where Cavman could pop up. It's always somewhere where there's sunshine for sure...

These stories – some surprises, some surprising – make up the lore, the myth, the symbol and the saga that is Cavman. Without these random stories at unique moments, the depth and potentials of the symbolic power of Cavman is not fully realized.

Cavman also brings joy. The word “fun” was brought up 79 times in the course of the interviews. People remember, absorb, and want to be part of fun, and to tell stories about it. Anna Lee explained this phenomenon:

When people are like at a game or when they're at a birthday party, at a wedding -- some of them are afraid to just jump out of their skin and go crazy. But then Cavman is someone who can do that because we have no bounds, and everyone loves Cavman. So, whatever you do, you could be jumping around in the stands or just hyping up the crowd.

And then once people see one person do that or the mascot do that, then they're like oh, I can do that too.

And each time people are brought out of their skin by Cavman, it provides an opportunity for a great story to share. For many of the performers, the mere fact that they were/are the mascot has afforded them some great stories to tell in various settings. For Ben Allen, it was a huge part of one job interview: “I got my first job, I truly believe, as a teacher in DC because I put on there (an application) that I was the mascot at UVA; and they were like so impressed by it. And that was like half the interview.” Truman Brody-Boyd, shared a similar sentiment in sharing his story of the Cavman in an educational setting: “It's funny, you know, I love that you asked this because (being Cavman) was my fun fact in Professor Brian Pusser’s class.” For Anna Lee as well: “I think talking with people, it is a very cool story to tell. Now I'm like, oh yeah, I was the mascot for my college. And so, they're like, ‘Okay, tell us your name what you do. And then a fun fact’ it's always my fun fact. I mean, I feel like it's going to be for a long time.”

These stories and identities are deeply personal for the performers and seem like they will be for their lifetime. They have all experienced a unique perspective that is rare and captivating. Everyone knows the mascot, but not everyone knows who is inside it and the stories they tell from the outside help to further galvanize the symbol.

Seek Soul

“He looks to celebrate what people are celebrating. He loves to share in people's joy. And I think that's part of what people love about having sharing moments with him is that he's sharing in the exact joy that you're having in that moment.”

– Kevin Thurman, former manager of Cavman program

In this quote we see the words love and joy each used twice in one breath. “Love” is the thematic word invoked most often across the interviews. It appears 96 times and serves as a testament to the deep emotionality of what Bolman and Deal are describing in their symbolic framework around “leading with soul.” To them, leading with soul is attaching an almost transcendent element to your organization – and while there is no natural tension one rooted in deeply held feelings and symbols that tie community members together.

Mayor Wade agreed when it comes to how people feel about Cavman, his first impression being: “Yeah, I just think it's just love, love...” Billy Peterson, in recollecting on Cavman’s visits to UVA Children’s Hospital, noted the role of joy and hope and teamwork in healing: “He stands for the spirit of the place. The fun the excitement the joy. The camaraderie Togetherness. You know Cavman is not, a silly sports thing. It's a really meaningful part of the university.” In Truman’s case, we see him sharing almost the exact same sentiment, from inside the outfit: “For me, Cavman represents the spirit side of UVA, right? Not the business side.” Ben Allen compared Cavman to a global symbol of giving and sharing: “It's something, it's like Santa Claus almost. I think whether you're a current student or you aspire to be, it's unites everyone for like their love around the university. It's like a bonding thing.”

Many different words were used to describe the deeper foundations of the “soul” of Cavman: spirit, love, joy, and inspiration. Some of this can be deduced in the more structural elements of Cavman’s look and qualities, which can also be found in Peirce’s frames. Perhaps Truman Brody Boyd put it best in this powerful reflection on how the mascot taps into these deeper emotions and feelings:

We don't talk, right, so we were just there to listen and respond, and really be a part of and just amplify their experience, right? It wasn't about us. It was about them. And

because we're kind of omniscient, joyous creatures that are around, I think they really appreciated just those costume characters being around to focus on their experience and their joy.

There is some definite overlap in the themes of inspiration and seeking soul, with seeking soul allowing for more flexibility in naming and describing the ways in which people feel and interpret Cavman. It is less the stories that inspire and more the feelings that are evoked when these inspirational encounters and experiences are had and felt. As we will continue to survey in the final leg of the conceptual framework – undergirded in Peirce’s Triadic Model of the Sign – we seek the elemental understanding and making meaning of the Cavman: What is it and what does it mean?

Understand

“Oh, it's disgusting...that suit gets hot. And I had put it on after a couple other people had worn it. And so, it collects sweat and it's got a familiar stench to it...”
– “Jay,” current Cavman performer

Charles Peirce, a pioneer in the field of semiotics, built a triadic model for identifying and understanding objects, signs, and symbols in 1906. It has withstood the test of time in such fields as sociology and critical studies, and I have chosen to employ it as the third leg in understanding the roles of mascots in university service. The model is fairly simple, by design, but was essential to my interpretation of the ways in which interviewees described Cavman and as I endeavored to provide a summative analysis of him. I should say, referring to Cavman as *him* remains a deliberate choice in nomenclature on my behalf, as the interviews afforded a variety of naming conventions:

Table 4

Words used to refer to Cavman

When referring to Cavman, interviewees called Cavman...
him
it
they
creature
CavMam
character
big costume person

Part of the triadic model is focusing on the object and naming it, understanding it, feeling it, and getting to know what the *it* is. Aside from nomenclature, responses to my interview questions on this essential point ranged from the granular minutiae of the costume to tactical impressions and organizational roles.

The *it*, is of course, elementally, a suit. Truman Brody Boyd describes it:

The suit is very bulky for a mascot costume. Like a lot of mascot costumes are like big and puffy and showy. But Cavman is kind of unique in the weight of it. It's like actually pretty heavy in terms of mascot costumes with both the muscle suit and like the jumper that you're in and the cape. And so, for me, the first time I put it on, I was just like, I need to be sure that I could move okay in this. I got to make sure I can maneuver in these boots and run around and still have a good time and show off my moves.”

Of course, the most common question he'd get: “Was it hot in there. That's always the first question. Always the first question. Was it hot in there? Yes. Oh my God. Of course it was.”

Anna Lee also recalled the heat of the costume:

It was really hot and it's very hard to breathe in that suit. And I was also just like trying to hype up the crowd. And then the humidity from the air, I couldn't breathe. And then that time I had to like step out and sit down inside or else I think I would pass out. That was probably the scariest experience (in the suit).

The actual suit of the Cavman is an intricate, custom, and complex system of spandex, plastic, cotton, plaster, mesh, and stuffing. There are usually two working suits in rotation, with an older suit as an emergency backup. The process to put it on takes time and often, Cavman has specific needs and requirements for appearances, as Kevin Thurman recalls:

I would say you're talking like celebrity status for Cavman, especially athletic events or events on grounds, we would make sure that he had a handler there with him. So especially if he's walking, there are requirements that he needed a private dressing room; he's not just changing in the open at an event like what if a person walks in. For big social hall events, he needs a private bathroom or private room.

To the mascot coordinators, it is more than just an outfit. It is also a cost, according to Kevin Thurman, who explained the cost of purchasing a new one: "To do the full costume, it's probably between like \$15,000 and \$18,000, you know, head to bottom because it is custom. The boots are surprisingly expensive. The head is obviously the most expensive piece." And according to current coordinator Kelley, there is a body type that fits the suit best:

You tend to want somebody that's at least 5'10'' to be in that suit. Now, we've definitely had some shorter ones, but you try to look for something like that, so that Cavman can look imposing. But you know, if somebody's a great performer, yeah, doesn't matter.

They can appear bigger in that suit than their height, right? And that's fine, too. We found we've had those for sure.

Suit aside, the Cavman presents as a certain type of character/creature/man/force. There is an understood and traditional way for Cavman to act, and of course, flexibility in how each Cavman performer approaches the role. So, depending upon the event or game, you are getting a slight variation of the role of the mascot. Anna Lee was the only woman in her student cohort who played Cavman. She wondered if people noticed:

I was the only girl during the time I was there, but I would still keep it as Cavman just because I feel like the purpose of the mascot was to keep that image. So, I would never be, like, offended if people were like, oh, is that a woman inside or something? Or they wouldn't know because I think they started to figure out that other girls could do it too. But yeah, I think like me being me and then Cavman being Cavman were two separate things. And so, I just tried to embody that.

Truman reflected upon how much of each performer is actually part of the Cavman: There's more of me in there than you'd expect. We have the traditions that bind us. We have the interactions and approaches that are uniform, or at least we have guidance on, right? Whether that's TV live outs or the spotlight at the beginning of a basketball game but as long as you get the walk down, you are able to take it and run with it. And there's a lot of opportunity for creativity and personality and excitement and so I really enjoy when you are at a football game or a basketball game or any event that Cavman's there. And when they switch out, you can tell which Cavman's in, you can tell who's doing what and you can tell – like my very, very, very few friends that knew that I was Cavman, like they could always tell when I was working because Cavman had a certain

walk, gait, danced a certain way for better and for worse. So, I really tried to bring as much as myself to the role as I could.

Ben Allen was even chastised for bringing a little too much of his personality to the role: “I was told by our coach that basketball games are family events, and I needed to not gyrate as much in my dancing.”

Gyration aside, there are practical concerns with the direction of Cavman, performances which involve a set of important rules. Kevin Thurman, former manager of the program explains:

Of course, there is only one Cavman so he can't be in two places at one time. So, I mean, hilarious stuff, from people submitting for a Saturday birthday party like in March and us having to wait to be like, “Hey, we think he can be there, but it depends on when the basketball game is because the last thing we want is to have the basketball game on at the birthday, the kid's birthday party, and Cavman's there and Cavman's on the TV.” That can't happen. There's only one Cavman. So, kind of even a small nuance like that...

So, there are conditions built around creating this deeper encounter through casting; it comes in the recruitment and training of the Cavman performers, the kind of people who create and experience the love and joy. Kelley Haney, current Cavman manager describes what they look for:

The people that I have come in and judge trials, they are looking for, specifics: Are they big in the character? Are they exciting to watch? Do you think they're going to add something to the performance factor, that type of thing. The people that come in and judge our tryouts are usually former CavMen...

Truman Brody-Boyd shares that it is a process that involves many layers of examination:

First, I had a meeting and then an application and then a phone interview. So, there's like four layers to it – then the in-person tryout. And so, after the in-person tryout, I was accepted and then we were off to the races.

An analysis applying Peirce's triadic model would suggest that in the 'understanding' of Cavman, one may describe Cavman as a unique collective: of individual people, ideas, traditions, duties, and shared experiences. The "object" being analyzed is layered and complicated – a person and thing that act and experience differently, for different places and contexts. And it is silent. That is non-negotiable. Yet it speaks loudly in its own way...

Kevin Thurman helps us move to better understanding the second facet of what Peirce puts forward in the triad as "representamen" – the thing the object represents. For Cavman, it is the University of Virginia:

The Cavman doesn't speak, doesn't address people that it's when you're in that. And I think that's what part of what makes a mascot like Cavman really cool different from say like the leprechaun at Notre Dame, where it's people you see who it is. This is bigger than one person. Cavman is himself. The performer, and I say this as a former mascot myself, that the performer is not the mascot, the mascot becomes you. You become Cavman when you put that on and there's a lot to that. You have to think of what you're representing, who you're representing. Cavman is this pillar of the university that people that are sports fans are not that are alums or not that just know UVA, they see Cavman, and they associate him immediately with Mr. Jefferson's university.

Make Meaning

*“I got to meet a million people in the suit that have never met me.”
-Truman Brody-Boyd, former Cavman performer*

This final section of my results will cover the final two triads of Peirce’s model of the sign: what is represented and what is interpreted. Across all the interviews, there is little debate that Cavman represents the University of Virginia. What Cavman is to UVA is expressed in a wide variety of terms that were provided by a subset of those interviewed:

Table 5

Responses to: “What is Cavman to UVA?” (as shared by a subset of those interviewed)

What Cavman is to UVA...
Convener
“Like Jim Ryan”
Symbol (3)
Superhero
Ambassador
Celebrity
“Like secret society”
A link
“Like a flag”
Morale Booster
Friend

Each person interviewed had an opinion on *what* Cavman means to UVA. The *why* Cavman has impact is presented in the six themes of this analysis, interviewee quotes, and the analysis discussed. Cavman is a suit, and a person, and part of the UVA community, but he appears to be in a category of his own in terms of what he means to UVA. Kevin Thurman spoke to the theme of meaning making:

I think what Cavman means to UVA is he's their number one ambassador. Cavman is the top person that you want out in the community showcasing what UVA is. He can personify, you talk about President Ryan's being great and good in all that we do and doing that for our community. That that's what Cavman is. He is great and good in all that he does. And he showcases the best of what the university has to offer. Without words. He does that without words. Which to me is even more powerful. He does it through his actions. And who he is. You see Cavman and the first thing you think of is the University of Virginia. And then your mind starts racing. You think your personal memories, your connections. Have you met Cavman before? What does UVA mean to you? And you're doing all of this not realizing that you're doing it because of Cavman. But it just becomes this flood of memories and thoughts and thoughts. To me, that's what an ambassador is. Helping people see the good, and that's what Cavman does. He brings the wonderful things that are UVA that encompass our university and brings it to everyone.

Billy Peterson from UVA Children's Hospital, when asked how he would describe Cavman, based on the many observed visits at the hospital, had this to say:

It's a symbol of the place, I think. And so, in that way, it's somehow even above those humans you know, you've got Jim Ryan, you've got the football and basketball coaches,

these figures that kind of stand for UVA in a lot of ways. I think Cavman stands for UVA in ways that they cannot.”

And when asked to say more about the personality traits he has observed that make Cavman this singular role model, he told me Cavman was:

Very friendly. Very kind. Very forgiving. Loves unconditionally. Doesn't pay attention to how important a person is or what they might give back to Cavman. Cavman just loves everybody. And is a friend to everybody. He's funny. Pretty athletic. You know, does some pretty amazing things for his body habitus, I would say.

These are exactly the kind of traits some might describe as “saintly.” These terms suggest that Cavman – like mythical heroes – represents an ideal, unobtainable, yet aspirational, for humans. And yet, five or six college-aged humans each year get to represent this ideal in a smelly costume. Truman understands the meaning of the symbol, personally and in the broader UVA community:

You embody the best values of what you represent, right? While you're in the Cavman suit you're representing the university. But you're also representing the university community, which is more important. And you embody those joyous values, the best values, the proudest values of that community. And so, I think when you get to boil that down into one exciting performer, that means a lot both to the performer and the people they're interacting with. And so, it associates with a lot of happy memories in that way. And it puts a lot of energy into the performance because of that. That's one aspect of it. And two, I think, big costume people are just fun, right?

That element of fun must also be understood as part of the meaning of Cavman. He is interpreted as larger than life, yet also as an ambassador and friend, but at his core, he remains exceedingly fun. Julie Caruccio noted, on Cavman’s meaningful traits:

He is silly, funny, a little bit of a jokester, kind. Super energetic, super athletic.

Absolutely die hard, the biggest fan of all UVA athletic sports, dedicated to our student athletes. Somebody you always want to be around because they're always fun and funny and willing to like make you laugh and have things feel like play.

Ben Allen agrees that Cavman is a symbol of UVA, but also found meaning in Cavman as part of a greater context:

To me, it's like an outlet -- like there's a lot of serious things going on all the time in the world. It's like it really does bring people joy, so I love it -- if you don't know a thing about a [University] you may know its mascot and its logo, right? It's like identifiable.

And so, I think it's just a thing that ties this community together.

Doris VanderMeulen, when asked why Cavman exists, seemed to find similar meaning in the mascot: “I guess it's just, it's like a flag or something – you know, trying to get people excited about supporting UVA. I would think it's just like a symbol. And for fun, I think mostly for fun.”

Document Analysis Coding

Document analysis of publicly accessible online data, web stories, historical sources, and Virginia Magazine articles were less significant in terms of attention given to supporting this case study – but nonetheless, important in providing context to the role of Cavman in a broader historical context. I approached review and examination of these documents – consisting of previously researched Virginia Magazine articles written over the years on the history of

Cavman – with the same analytic approach of applying my conceptual framework codes to my interviews. Most of the salient points on the history that I addressed and wrote about in the introduction, from previous mascots like Beta and Seal, to learning from the unpopular introduction of The ‘Hoo, were coded under Bolman and Deal’s symbolic framework of “telling stories.” A historical approach to knowing how Cavman evolved was necessary, as a plethora of primary and secondary sources couched Cavman in the deep history of what or who preceded him.

The secondary code in my document analysis that supported my deeper understanding of the program was employing Pierce’s semiotics frame of “understanding” as a natural and obvious way to pull relevant data from pre-existing documents. These two codes informed my data analysis by allowing me to ask myself whether the data helps me better understand the history of the mascot program at UVA, along with does that data tell a compelling story of how and why we get to the current moment of the mascot program. This linear, time-based approach – using two consistent coding applications – led me to telling a better story of Cavman – and of UVA – in the context of public service, which previous literature does not reference. In no previous literature on Cavman were there direct references to public service – but aligning the codes to my conceptual framework showed the qualities of public service in higher education as throughlines in both interviews and document analysis. Service, UVA, and Cavman all became synonymous in this process.

Whether you now see Cavman as symbol, celebrity, Santa, secret society, or superhero – my hope is that these ten semi-structured interviews of varying opinions and positionalities – examined through seven distinctive lenses, and supported by three pillars of theory in my conceptual framework – along with thoughtful document analysis, all collectively adds to the

conversation on what is the role of a mascot; and begins to lay the groundwork for our understanding of how it serves a university community and beyond. This service mission will be further explored in the final chapter.

Chapter V:

Discussion & Implications

It is not often that Charles Peirce's semiotics triadic model of the sign is applied to better understand the public service impact of a mustachioed mascot in Central Virginia. 1978 was the year the "Cavman" was introduced at UVA. This was decades after adopting the original University mascot, 'The Cavalier,' which began in the mid 1920's (O'Hare, 2015). I am fairly certain the original Cavman stood tall with open arms in a costume that was hot, involved shared sweat, generated joy, and meant something deeper to the community. See for yourself:

Figure 12

Original Cavman suit (O'Hare 2015).



I am also confident that this research provides a novel perspective on the role and potentials of Cavman, using data gathered from an array of sources, and analyzed through the lens of a conceptual framework that employs organizational theory from higher education and semiotics literature. Data were collected and arrayed into seven thematic categories: Connect, Strengthen, Inspire, Tell, Story, Seek Soul, Understand, and Make Meaning. In this concluding section I will draw upon each of them in order to better understand my two research questions:

RQ1: In what ways does the university mascot serve a public service mission?

RQ2: How do people perceive Cavman and UVA, through the embodiment of Cavman in a service mission?

Public Service / Public Good

A public good has a social or public benefit, and is available to all equally (Tilak, 2018). Pusser (2006) reminds us how higher education is a public good, where debate and discussion can richly occur in a “public sphere,” with a widening and broadening aperture. Marginson (2011) examines higher education producing private benefits but posits a more global, contested and politicized redefining of public character – essentially, all supporting a nuanced flexibility in how we can look at identifying public goods in a higher education setting. The University of Virginia Cavman is perhaps not at first an obvious or essential public good; and yet looking back at the data produced for this case study, Cavman represents many of the aspects of a public good/public interest in higher education: democratically dispensed and helping articulate an optimistic and accessible public character. We saw this through the hospital visits, from the recollections of both the performers and doctors who witnessed the public utility provided

through the direct care and attention of those vulnerable in the community. Dr. Billy Peterson captures the public service role in these visits by sharing:

It was such a boost for these kids...all these kids that were being seen at the children's hospital or in the clinics there you know are going through challenging circumstance.

And so, to be able to brighten their day and brighten their experience and attach positivity to that and to that location, it was always really meaningful.”

As Pusser shares, education remains an essential public good, one that provides education, research and service in the public interest (Marginson, Pusser, Leslie and Johnston, Carnoy and Levin, etc.) This includes the potentials and products of this arena, of which Cavman is firmly enmeshed. What this study largely does not encompass is a deeper analysis of the “entertainment” markers or values of the Cavman. Cavman emerged as a deeply entrenched and symbolic figure in the life of the university – not a product. Yes, while Cavman is also a product, the document analysis and interviews yielded little around expressions of Cavman being solely perceived for entertainment value. Cavman, being connected to the public service mission of the University through its long-term stewardship and presence at all types of events, becomes an immediately successful connector in a short period of time. He carries weight and wisdom, which is a similar link to the public service missions of how we experience universities: most have been around for a long period of time, they bridge learners and connect generations, and often have a touch of antiquity. As with a University of Virginia education, there is learning – but a greater depth when it connects to Thomas Jefferson, two hundred years of tradition, and countless alumni produced as citizen leaders. Cavman is on a similar arc: rooted in history, shared experiences, and scattered but consistent care and presence through antiquity. Kevin

Thurman perhaps summed it up best when he reminded us of this connection between mascot, University, and service mission:

I take pride in what this university does and means for our community here in Charlottesville. Having been an employee at the university, I think [Cavman] is an outlet for people to share their love and affinity for the university.

In sum, Cavman breathes culture, connection, community, camaraderie, and continuity of what UVA aspires to be in a complicated arena where there are myriad parties articulating an agenda or cause. For Cavman, his service in the public interest is dispersed in many forms, in many places, yet always, as an agent of the institution's mission and values. As Julie Caruccio stated, he is "literally walking UVA." May I also add dancing UVA, high-fiving UVA, listening UVA, hugging UVA, ~~gyrating UVA~~, and being UVA.

RQ1: In what ways does the university mascot serve a public service mission?

From the semi-structured interviews, we found seven thematic ways in which the Cavman served the UVA community. The first five represent "the ways" in which Cavman is connecting the UVA community, strengthening it, inspiring it, telling the story of it, and seeking soul for it. These themes remind us of the intergenerational bonds formed from decades spanning classes of students and community members – with the mascot serving as touchstone in rekindling of memories shared, forgotten, or renewed. This was evidenced by the story of the alumni who see the Cavman and like Proust's taste and smell of the madeleine in *Remembrance of Things Past*, are immediately brought back to their halcyon college days, connecting again.

We see a strengthening of the Charlottesville community in Cavman's many service activities beyond the literal and figurative arena: we see Cavman in active service on the

Downtown Mall, at community parades, celebrating children's birthday parties, partaking in weddings, and being a present, uncomplicated figure in the lives of the broader UVA and Charlottesville community. We see staff members strengthen affinity through a photo shared with a child and a deep saturation of the word "community" being documented through this lens.

In perhaps the most compelling "way" examined, we observe a deep connection of service to the UVA Children's Hospital through the inspiring stories of care and attention given to our most vulnerable children. Here are stories of showing up, listening, supporting very sick or terminal children – all with grace and compassion; along with identification of times when a lonely child in an arena needs a t-shirt, or just time spent sitting together in the nosebleed section. Here we see unselfish, care-based service outside of sports and a deeply human connection between person, and person dressed as a person. There is no exact, specific reason why Cavman often produces an unparalleled joy for children; and it should be known, that from Doris VanderMeulen to Juandiego Wade, there were recollections of Cavman causing terror or fear in the experiences of children. But Truman Brody-Boyd identifies that there is something just very different about a large headed, silent mascot. It is in this unusualness that extreme, mostly joy filled reactions are elicited amongst kids and they become etched in their memories. The infrequent nature of these interactions, often tied to seminal moments at hospitals, birthday parties, or sporting events allow for the conditions of memory making amongst youth, all providing a longitudinal base for building memories and connections in the future with Cavman as the constant, the touchstone.

Telling stories of the mascot enrich the lore and expand the ways in which people see this public good: from dancing wedding performer to dynamic job interview subject matter, the wide-ranging ways in which the Cavman story is told – by those who perform him and by those who

observe him – adds to its known ways to serve. He is fun and there is an inherent fascination with something that can hype up a crowd at an arena, be part of a wedding party, and be one of the singularly best college experiences for those who have the joy to inhabit the suit.

Cavman seeks soul through his general commitment to bring joy and love to the community. Love was mentioned more than any other thematic word across all ten semi-structured interviews, and this depth was exhibited in the ways in which interviewees discussed their interactions and emotions, observed or experienced. At the heart of the places visited was always an ethic of enhancing the core of the experience for those involved. The performer creates it, experiences, and gives it -- and it is returned in reinvested in this communal exchange. Aside from time, there is no real cap on the love or care Cavman can give. He is “omniscient” and “love, love” at UVA sporting events (home and away), the UVA Children’s Hospital, weddings (in town and out of town), corporate outings / events, community parades, children’s birthday parties, retirement parties, University events – and everything else in between.

RQ2: How do people perceive Cavman and UVA, through the embodiment of Cavman in a service mission?

The perception of Cavman is best articulated within the remaining two themes of understanding and meaning. These themes are also fundamental aspects of Peirce’s Triadic Model of the Sign. Here, we discovered narratives – from Cavman performers themselves to those who have observed Cavman – that suggest the mascot is perceived as a convener, symbol, superhero, ambassador, celebrity, a link, a morale booster, and a friend. As an embodiment of UVA, he represents all the best parts of what one would like to ascribe to the public service

mission of a postsecondary organization – a great and good champion – for the university writ large and in close engagement with those in need of support, inspiration and joy.

As part of this understanding, we learn from two distinct groups of people in the interviews: those who performed as the Cavman and those who have not. In both cases, there is a largely shared understanding that there is durable symbolic value of Cavman as conduit to the experiences and aspirations of UVA and the community. He is many other things too: for performers, he is composed of a bulky, hot, and sweaty suit as well, pronounced in his superpower of silence in the face of high comedy and tragedy. For observers, he is athletic and expensive and fun and tall and omniscient. He is Santa and superhero, with a mutually understood keen awareness that he is also a young man or women doing this very part time and in between classes as a University of Virginia student. Cavman is your best friend but also everyone's best friend, well known to all and yet a mostly unsolved mystery in terms of who is underneath.

And in terms of making meaning of Cavman, he is synonymous with the University of Virginia, as an iconic face with much being carried on his back: the burden to represent the best of UVA, to bear high expectations to be fun and funny and kinetic, as well present, powerful and personable – and always “on.”

Nothing lasts forever – businesses close and people die – but the presence and ascribed meaning of the mascot, and complementary hopes for the eternal promise of an institution of higher learning – is that perhaps some things can last forever, or least persist as long as hope and love, and fun, and service to others remains in the beating heart and carried soul of a mascot named Cavman.

Pusser wonders whether a public good can be “preserved in higher education that is physical and fluid, discursive and symbolic, historical and mutable” (p. 24, 2006). My hope is that Cavman, as matching this description of a public good, can be preserved, with enhancements and broader lessons learned from this case study.

Recommendations for Practice

So, why were multiple years and hundreds of hours dedicated to understanding Cavman in this context? Using the conceptual framework based in organizational theory and semiotics, I believe something important has been brought to light in this research, that mascots both serve, and make a case for, the public good produced through higher education. My hope is that this realization can provide recommendations for new understanding of the potentials for realizing a greater good through the efforts of university mascots. What follows are seven recommendations that emerge from this research, along with a preface:

Preface: Beyond Athletics

Prior research, and my own findings within this research, confirm the close association of mascots with athletics. At the same time, my findings suggest that mascots have meaningful potentials in other realms of university life, as symbols of the importance of the institution, as joyful, meaningful additions to celebrations, and as significant sources of support for children in hospitals and through visits to facilities with seniors in the community. These practices are just a few of the ways in which this university and others serve the public interest in higher education, and there are many more opportunities in my recommendations here, and still others awaiting discovery and implementation.

Recommendation One: Pilot Outposts and Outside of Athletics Alignments

What if the Cavman program also lived in the provost's office? This question was posited years ago by my advisor Brian Pusser in early conversations on what this research might lead to in terms of outcomes. The question always stuck with me as I am now even more convinced that Cavman is a treasured public good of this public university and the point of origin of such goods signals importance. While it is obvious the Cavman program is a well administered, beloved tradition in the athletics space, some shared governance outside of athletics might help the rest of the university community see a depth to what Cavman can do – yes, “the worm” at center court in JPJ is an important tradition. But the inspiration and stories of soul from the mascot's visits to the UVA Children's Hospital suggest that Cavman's power for good, which is inextricably linked to the University's mission, could be expanded and extended in the public interest and in the interests of an institution, and a sector in need of greater public support. Where do we need more love in the University of Virginia enterprise? Where would fun help boost morale? Could a heartwarming, silent best friend make a difference in the teaching, research, or service elements at UVA? Would Cavman being central to the University's annual Public Service Week, hosted by the Provost Office, tie together a powerful mosaic of the public service missions and potentials of the University? Could this show be brought to Richmond or DC to strengthen political capital and earn goodwill through this non-speaking spokesman? A stronger presence in everything from student activities and staff appreciation to inspiration support for faculty and students during finals week might afford new partnerships, additional funding streams, and increased service roles for Cavman.

And what if there were two mascots? Or many, all spotlighting a specific feature of UVA's public service roles. Here, you could easily see a new character built into the everyday life of the UVA Hospital, bringing a daily dose of joy and service to patients and staff alike.

Additionally, another mascot could be tied to UVA's public research roles, another who loves and supports teaching – perhaps even another for something as specific as spotlighting a department or service at UVA. Could schools have their own mascot? These questions are all worth considering, with the caveat that for a mascot to “work” in an organization, it needs thoughtful planning, care in performance, and it must be part of some time-based meaningful arc of experiences that connect mission and experiences over time. Essentially, a second mascot won't immediately provide a deep sense of connection at first meeting or unveil.

Recommendation Two: Advertise and Promote “Cavman Request Form” in Underrepresented Communities

According to the current Cavman manager Kelley Haney, there is no shortage of requests for appearances on and off-Grounds by Cavman, with 2-3 coming each day, in addition to sporting events. Many of the requests seem to demonstrate a similar pattern: appearances at UVA Hospital, birthday parties, weddings, corporate events, and more. What I did not observe in the interviews was a huge effort to publicize the request form or expand the reach to which people had access to it. There was no effort to hide it or keep it from anyone, but there seems to be an opening for expanding access, especially in underserved communities in Charlottesville. This was reinforced by Mayor Juandiego Wade wishing to see more of Cavman in spaces that aren't just the Downtown Mall, but often neglected pocket communities in Charlottesville. This targeted advertising could be done easily with a small social media spend and possibly fit nicely if tied to the Public Service Pathways program, a partnership with Madison House, or connected to outreach from the Equity Center, or UVA Center for Community Partnerships. A very obvious and practical next step would be approaching Ben Allen – former Cavman and Executive

Director of the Equity Center – and socializing the idea of sharing the request form more in the community and neighborhoods that could use the benefit of time spent with Cavman.

The notion of underserved communities does not just apply to the Charlottesville community, but also to communities within the larger UVA or regional tent that have little to no touch points with Cavman. Some examples of those communities may be UVA Health system satellite offices that aren't UVA Children's, non-UVA affiliated hospitals in the same market with affinity and appreciation for the UVA brand, local kid festivals and fundraisers, high attendance events like road races/marathons/music festivals/film festivals, and Richmond or DC related collaborations, from targeted events at the DC Cherry Blossom festival to throwing out the first pitch at a National game. The requests from this program remain reactive to the incoming needs and could be more rightsized with identifying greatest needs or new growth opportunities, and providing direct outreach.

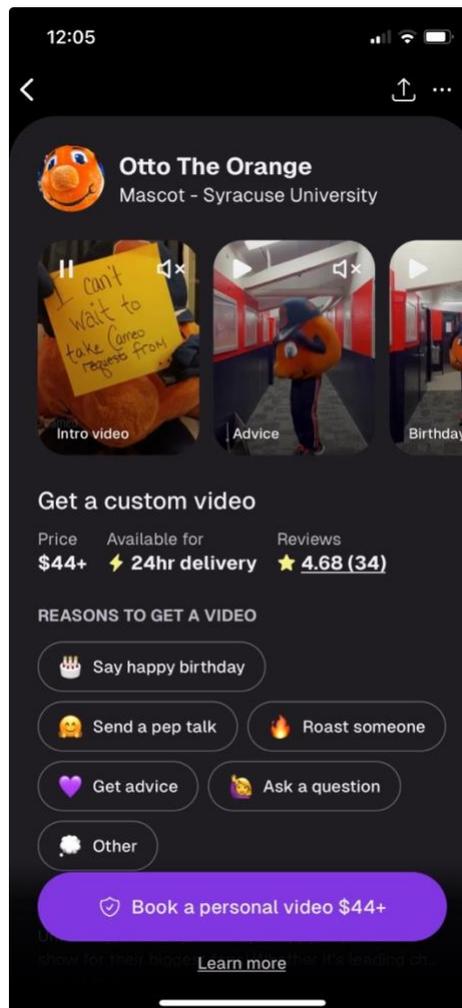
Recommendation Three: Harness Digital

There are obviously travel and time limitations upon every appearance by Cavman. There are only two suits and roughly five performers that can make appearances. However, there is opportunity to expand his reach and impact by creating a stronger presence in portals that do not require the mascot's physical presence. Cavman has occasionally populated Instagram account with 4600 followers and could grow to be a portal that accepts digital requests: short videos of Cavman sharing the joy and representing the University; well-orchestrated signage documenting what Cavman is celebrating, along with taking on the role of providing simple yet sweet flourishes to mark occasions big and small. This could follow the popular model of the app "Cameo" which allows for sourcing of celebrity videos. There is precedent for this with other

mascots in the NCAA, with “Otto the Orange” charging \$44 for custom videos, supporting many of the same types of in person requests.

Figure 13

Example of University Mascot on Cameo



With some regulation and new guidelines, this technological expansion could broaden the scalability of sharing Cavman with the world and breaking down geographic restraints.

Recommendation Four: Mascot Exchange Program – “Study Abroad” Weekend

We have come to better understand the power of connection that occurs within a community through the actions and presence of the mascot. Yet, with this being a case study

very specific to the experiences and role of the University of Virginia mascot, there is opportunity that can be had in cross-University collaborations and learnings. Ben Allen and Truman Brody Boyd spoke of their relationships with mascots they had met from other universities; Ben, through attending “Mascot Camp” and Truman, through collaborations with the ACC. There could be certain lessons shared and learned through a loosely organized mascot exchange, where performers of the mascot from another school follow, support, and perhaps even briefly perform the mascot at a participating school. In these exchanges, Cavman performers will also be able to visit other schools, learn from their mascot programs and see how their work is being done. This recommendation helps position the delimiting factors associated with doing a case study on one particular school and not conducting a survey on multiple programs. The school spirit and traditions associated with each program will not always perfectly translate for applicability, but they would absolutely exchange best practices, ideas, new dance moves, and tips on everything from programmatic to performance.

This recommendation could run parallel with continued efforts that exist in current Mascot Camp opportunities and would complement and not compete with those national models. Supporting an open and fruitful exchange amongst performers will only help raise the public service awareness and mission of this unique performance sector.

Recommendation Five: Proselytize

The data from this capstone would be useful and compelling information to share at academic and student service conferences, as well as NCAA and ACC-based conferences and convenings. The presentation of a mascot program as a public service, with compelling data, could inspire, connect, and motivate university officials to think differently about their mascot programs. There is much to learn from putting our case study out into the arena and opening it up to suggestion.

As part of this recommendation, it would be useful to create a website with information and suggestions from this research, and the “case” for the mascot as a public good and a key part of a university’s service mission. The website could generate new enthusiasm around the “Why” and therefore a case to be made for the “how and when” of a program being initiated.

Recommendation Six: Invest in Suit/Support

If something is important, you find a way to make it happen. Without evidence to support its importance, it is often hard to make the case for investing in something. This rings true with the mascot program at UVA. Additional funding and programmatic support may help ease some of the administrative burden and build conditions for scalability. New funding models could be aligned with emerging priorities and goals met, along with a much-needed additional source of revenue for suit upkeep, new suit production, or additional administrative support to help with management of a growing program. Even if the Cavman mascot program chose not to grow or expand, having a consistent and dedicated revenue stream from outside of athletics and birthday party appearances will only alleviate the pressures of preserving the standards of this program. Donors could be approached for gifts related to endowing the suit or giving the Cavman program manager additional resources while fielding requests and scheduling appearances. Currently, the program sits as an additional responsibility of the Cheer Team coach Kelley Haney; in a previous iteration, it sat in marketing with Kevin Thurman. As we have come to learn, Cavman both markets the school and performs with the cheer team during sporting events; there is a duality to him that provides a case for connective tissue in multiple shops, and therefore, a case to be made for multiple beneficiaries to help contribute to its success. In the great scheme of higher education budgets, \$15,000 for a suit every 5-years and a part-time intern should be money well spent given the proven value Cavman brings.

Recommendation Seven: Measure and Quantify Impact Yearly

While I hope this capstone provides a helpful data point supporting the value of Cavman at UVA in a public service role, I believe continually tracking and recording key performance indicators will continue to provide metrics-based proof points year to year on impact. My study was mostly qualitative, but quantitative data gathered will demonstrate growth, people impacted and provide fact-based analysis for additional needs the program may find. Essentially, the Cavman program should be proactive in consistently realigning what Cavman means to the University and University community, and to university athletics. I believe the data from these interviews will support that case for some time, but new data will need to be collected: from numbers of visitors, newly engaged sites, to gathering testimonials of the personal growth and impact had on the individual performers. This effort would go a long way in buttressing the momentum that my capstone hopefully has on the mascot.

Limitations and Future Research

My semi-structured case study attempted to provide data for how Cavman was perceived and what he did in the context of public service at UVA. I think there is compelling qualitative data that supports a strong, service based, myriad symbolic role to the university and community, but it obviously does not come without its limitations, namely generalizability, data collection methods, and researcher positionality.

For generalizability, it is a very specific study on one place: the University of Virginia. While UVA shares similar qualities to other AAU, ACC, or Virginia based schools, this case will always be the story of UVA and with it, remain entrenched in the specificity of higher education identity and uniqueness of traditions. While we could compare this study of Cavman to mascots at Duke or UNC or Virginia Tech, there will always be limiting arguments to be made that the

generalizability is only truly limited to findings specific to UVA. I attempted to couch this in Creswell's literature on case studies, which avoid too many objectives or something that becomes overly generalizable, keeping them timebound, and coupled with place or activity (2018). In my opinion, bringing this work outside of UVA and focusing on more than one mascot, I would've potentially gained breadth but lost a good deal of depth. However, I believe that the recommendations above have universal applicability to other schools and organizations that have a mascot program.

In terms of data collection, I chose interviewing as my form of collection, supported by Seidman's argument that it is a powerful way to make meaning from inquiry (2019). My outreach to interview subjects was based on publicly available information and general awareness of the mascotting space. Not every person I reached out to responded and some interviews were largely cut short given time restraints. All were conducted over Zoom or via phone, with in person interviewing never being the method even though Creswell argues it can prove to be more effective (2018). The advantages of Zoom's transcription services and the ease to which it was to schedule ten very busy people in the course of a day proved more desirable to me than the benefit of meeting people in person.

Lastly, I was always very cognizant of my complex relationship with the subject matter, as I was a former performer of the mascot during the 2020-21 calendar. Not showing bias, checking assumptions, and being as objective as possible in my selection of participants was always checked by thoughtful guidance from both the rigorous IRB process and through careful, iterative consideration with my committee chair Brian Pusser. Every step of the data gathering and analysis, including the sourcing of interviewees, I made sure to use my prior experiences to frame an empathetic engagement with the interviewees without influencing what they shared or

to what degree. Still, implicit bias is hard to solely eradicate from one's work and I don't think I would've had the passion to study this had I not been part of it – but being part of it, at a deep level, perhaps informed my broader analysis. However, I think the net benefit and shared experience of being a former performer enhanced the quality of the interviews and opened me up to a more acute understanding of who should be included as subjects. Additionally, everyone interviewed except for the confidential current Cavman, signed a consent form to have their actual identity associated with what they were saying. Knowing their actual names and affiliations would be tied to this research may have provided an additional filter to what they shared knowing it would be made public. Personally, I did not experience any guardedness to their answers, but it is impossible to fully know. Finally, given my previous association with Cavman program, I had some degree of closeness and familiarity with most people I interviewed. Anna Lee was the only person I had never previously met, with all other participants being known to me in some personal or professional capacity.

Future Research

There were several aspects of future research that this case study brought up but did not dive deeper into further exploration. Anna Lee's experiences as a female performer of the Cavman could be an entire analysis on gender and mascots, on playing a role with intrinsic and extrinsic assumptions. Future research could also look at a surveyed approach across higher education programs, focusing just on the role and potentials of the mascot in sports, just on the role of mascots outside of sports, and research on the performativity and non-verbal elements of mascots. While not all mascots are big-headed characters who do not speak, most are – along with beloved characters outside of higher educations that come with their own mythology, meaning making, and symbolism. My guess is that Disney World theme park characters would

be fertile ground for this continued inquiry, with a focus on probing the non-speaking, kid-centric appeal of mascots.

Lastly, I hope my fairly unique conceptual framework can be a helpful tool in helping organizations analyze the roles unique people and characters play within their organizational and service-based ecosystem. I believe the organizational theory and semiotic approach could inform deeper understanding of university founders (Thomas Jefferson), university presidents (Jim Ryan), or iconic university coaches or administrators (Tony Bennett, Leonard Sandridge, etc.) I believe this framework applied to them and their cascading network would provide a richness of impact and service from these larger-than-life figures in university life. Essentially, the “Mt. Rushmore” figures of any school could be better probed and understood by using the conceptual framework’s thematic lenses, with a simple question: what do they do, and what do they mean to a great public university?

End Credits

Has your view of Cavman changed? Is he king or jester? Is he a he? And how does he provide a service in a community? My hope is that this qualitative case pushed one’s thinking of exactly how a mascot serves a university, gathering a richness of interview data from a representative cross section of performers, community members, administrators, fans, and managers of the program.

The textured thematic groupings of ways in which Cavman served as bringer of spirit, community continuity, and memory at sporting events, and a powerful silent presence at hospitals, with an ebullience of care and attention from crowds big and small, wedding dance floors and community parades. Through these examples, Cavman was analyzed truly from within

– by the performer of the Cavman, with great appreciation for the symbol they represent and the physicality of the role. It is the sweetest job with a stinky smell. Looking from outside, we heard from doctors who observed love and joy during moments of greatest pain, and a mayor who observed Cavman as builder and booster of community. And to bring us down to earth, Cavman was also big, scary, and not personally interesting – although admittedly an important symbol according to a women’s basketball season ticket holder. All told, it is clear that Cavman serves the University community in a way unparalleled to really anyone or anything else.

He is a student and a suit. He is a king and a jester. He was a joy to be, study, and get to know a bit better. May this capstone contribute to the further exploration of the potentials of university mascots and the magic they indelibly bring in service of the public good.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (MASCOT PERFORMER)

Capstone: Jester and King: The Symbolic Role of the University Mascot in Performative Service of the Public Good

Framework: Examining/understanding the mascot – mascot/self

Duration: 00:60 minutes

Introduce Topic / Gain Informed Consent / Confidentiality

- **Introduction**
 - o Myself (Matt Weber)
 - o The Topic (Mascot Capstone)
- **Consent**
 - o Right to refuse to participate and/or drop out at any time; seek written consent at this point.
- **Confidentiality**
 - o Confidentiality of data will be maintained in collection, trends in data will be reported after I member-check and analyze the data; but your name or ideas may not be kept confidential as this case study is specific to UVA.

Establish Rapport

- 1.) Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study
- 2.) Any fun vacations this past holiday?

Opening Questions

- 1.) When did you start and how long were you the mascot at UVA?
- 2.) Was it your first time as a mascot or did you prior experience at another college or in high school?

Questions: The Role of the Mascot

- 1.) What did being the Cavman mean to you?
 - 2.) Did your perspective of Cavman change after performing as Cavman? What are some examples?
 - 3.) What did you think other people thought of Cavman? Can you give some examples?
 - 4.) Can you say more about your role serving as Cavman away from games and competition?
 - 5.) What role(s) do you think Cavman plays at UVA? Can you give some examples?
 - 6.) What role(s) does Cavman play outside UVA, in the Charlottesville community?
-

Questions: The Experience of the Cavman

- 1.) What was your UVA affiliation?
 - 2.) Why did you want to be a Cavman? What is your mascot origin story?
 - 3.) What was your tryout like?
 - 4.) How often did you perform as Cavman?
 - 5.) Did you do a good job keeping your identity as a performer a secret?
 - 6.) What were some of the typical locations and places you performed as Cavman?
 - a. Did you have a favorite place or moment? Tell me about that time.
 - b. Did you have a least favorite place or moment? Tell me about that time.
 - 7.) How did you feel when you put on the suit?
 - a. What are some words you would use to describe the experience?
 - b. Why those words?
 - 8.) Can you share a funny story about when you were Cavman?
 - 9.) What was your favorite Cavman experience?
 - Why was it your favorite?
 - Are there things you would change about serving as Cavman?
 - Upon reflection, how do you see the Cavman benefiting the University. How might we maximize those benefits?
 - What was the best thing about being Cavman? How might the University maximize those “best things.”
-

Last question:

- Any advice for future Cavman performers?
-

Closing Statements / Reaffirm Consent / Confidentiality

-

Consent

- Right to refuse to participate and/or drop out at any time

- Confidentiality

- Confidentiality of data will be maintained in collection, trends in data will be reported after I member-check and analyze the data; but your name or ideas may not be kept confidential as this case study is specific to UVA.

- Next Step

- I will be in touch when this is all done. Thank you for your time as responses are valuable and necessary to gain a deeper understanding of growing mascot research.

**APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
(OBSERVER/ORGANIZER OF MASCOT ACTIVITY)**

Capstone: Jester and King: The Symbolic Role of the University Mascot in Performative Service of the Public Good

Framework: Examining/understanding the mascot – mascot/self

Duration: 00:60 minutes

Introduce Topic / Gain Informed Consent / Confidentiality

- **Introduction**
 - o Myself (Matt Weber)
 - o The Topic (Mascot Capstone)
- **Consent**
 - o Right to refuse to participate and/or drop out at any time; seek written consent at this point..
- **Confidentiality**
 - o Confidentiality of data will be maintained in collection, trends in data will be reported after I member-check and analyze the data; but your name or ideas may not be kept confidential as this case study is specific to UVA.

Establish Rapport

- 1.) Thank you for participating in this research.
- 2.) Any fun vacations this past holiday?
- 3.) Any questions for me before we start?

Opening Questions

- 1.) What is/was your role at UVA or in Charlottesville community and how does it intersect with the UVA mascot?
- 2.) How often do you interact with the mascot and to what capacity?

Questions: Perceptions of the role of Cavman

- 1.) What role(s) do you think Cavman plays at UVA?
 - 2.) What role(s) does Cavman play away from game days at the University and outside UVA, in the Charlottesville community? Can you give examples?
 - 3.) What would you change about Cavman?
 - 4.) What is the value of a mascot in higher education?
 - 5.) What is the value of Cavman on Grounds? Can you give examples?
 - 6.) What do see as Cavman's most important contributions to UVA?
 - 7.)
 - 8.) Any advice do you have for future Cavman performers?
-

Questions: Reactions to Cavman

- 1.) What are your personal feelings of Cavman?
- 2.) What do you like about him? Can you give examples?
- 3.) What do you not like about him? Can you give examples?
- 4.) Any interesting stories observing the mascot? Tell me about a time when you saw Cavman? How did it make you feel?

Closing Statements / Reaffirm Consent / Confidentiality

- **Consent**
 - Right to refuse to participate and/or drop out at any time
 - **Confidentiality**
 - Confidentiality of data will be maintained in collection, trends in data will be reported after I member-check and analyze the data; but your name or ideas may not be kept confidential as this case study is specific to UVA.
-
- **Next Step**
 - I will be in touch when this is all done. Thank you for your time as responses are valuable and necessary to gain a deeper understanding of growing mascot research.