

Leadership Dynamics in NCAA Athletics: Communication and Stakeholder Prioritization Between Athletic Directors and Direct Reports in Divisions I, II, and III

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This study explores the athletic directors (ADs) and athletics' direct reports (ADRs) leadership dynamics across NCAA Divisions I, II, and III, focusing on communication practices and stakeholder prioritization. Using a survey instrument informed by prior Division II research, this study examines perceptions of communication practices and differences in the prioritization of key stakeholders, such as student-athletes, alumni, and sponsors. Data were collected from ADs and ADRs across all divisions and analyzed using independent t-tests for Likert scale responses related to communication practices and Mann-Whitney U tests for stakeholder rankings. Overall results indicated that significant differences were reported by ADs and ADRs in three areas: communication, sponsorships/partnerships, and enrollment. A more developed conversation related to enrollment and the overall strategic plan of the university may help both groups gain a better understanding of the stakeholder groups and how best to make decisions to meet organizational goals.

Keywords: athletic director, athletics direct report, management, strategic planning, communication, stakeholders

Introduction

The evolving landscape of intercollegiate athletics calls for a nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics across all NCAA divisions. Athletic directors (ADs) and

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their athletic direct reports (ADRs) play critical roles in shaping not only the operational success of athletic departments but also their broader institutional impact. While the AD oversees the athletics department, they also report directly to a senior administrator at the institution (e.g., the university president)—the ADR (Elliott et al., 2023). Effective leadership within these roles is paramount, especially given the varied stakeholder pressures and organizational goals that often diverge between athletic department administrators and university leadership. Understanding how ADs and ADRs prioritize stakeholders and communicate in decision-making processes is therefore crucial to developing best practices that support positive outcomes for the organization and its student-athletes, alumni, faculty, and external supporters alike.

Building on the findings of a pilot study conducted within NCAA Division II, which highlighted communication, mutual respect, and shared values as essential to a positive AD-ADR relationship (see Elliott et al., 2023), this article expands the scope to include Divisions I, II, and III. The study used a comprehensive survey instrument to explore these dynamics across NCAA divisions, assessing how ADs and ADRs may prioritize stakeholders differently and how they perceive current communication practices in their respective roles.

The complexity of AD and ADR decision-making processes is brought to light when considering the high visibility of intercollegiate athletics. Decisions made by athletic administrators frequently attract significant media attention, impact numerous stakeholder groups, and require careful consideration from institutional leadership beyond athletics. For example, the recent termination of the University of Tennessee's head women's basketball coach, Kellie Harper, illustrates the multifaceted nature of such decisions. Tennessee Athletic Director Danny White acknowledged the difficulty of this decision, noting Harper's deep connection to the university and her historic contributions as a former student-athlete. He expressed respect for her dedication to the program, stating, "Decisions like these are never easy to make, especially with someone who has done so much for the Lady Vols as a three-time national champion student-athlete. Her love and passion for Tennessee and the Lady Vols is second to none. She has invested so much heart and soul into our program and truly has given her all for Tennessee" (Adelson, 2024, p. 1).

White's statement underscores the nuances of such a decision, which involves an extensive network of stakeholders, including Harper's recruits, current players, former teammates, colleagues of legendary coach Pat Summitt, alumni, donors, athletic staff, and the broader fan base. Each group holds a vested interest in the program's success and, at times, conflicting perspectives on its direction. These stakeholders' diverse interests can influence the narrative and bring additional complexity to leadership decisions. Given the magnitude of such personnel

decisions, and other decisions made in the athletic department, close collaboration and clear communication between the AD and ADR become essential. Stakeholder prioritization and effective communication between ADs and ADRs thus play a critical role in navigating complex scenarios, where the implications extend beyond departmental objectives into the broader institutional and public domain.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to investigate AD and ADR dynamics across NCAA Divisions I, II, and III, with a specific focus on how ADs and ADRs communicate and prioritize stakeholders. By examining variations in stakeholder prioritization and communication practices, this article seeks to identify best practices for effective AD-ADR communication processes that can enhance leadership cohesion and strengthen institutional support within intercollegiate athletic departments.

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Do ADs and ADRs perceive the communication patterns in their relationship differently?

RQ2: Are there significant differences in the prioritization of stakeholders between ADs and ADRs, and if so, where are these differences?

Review of Literature

Athletic Direct Reports and Communication Practices

Research has indicated that effective communication and trust are pivotal in AD relationships with university presidents (LeCrom & Pratt, 2016), though this area remains underexplored for ADs and ADRs specifically. The Division III ADR Institute supports professional development for ADRs, as ADRs receive an overview of the NCAA and best practices. Through this institute, experienced ADRs tackle current issues such as budgeting, personnel management, and student-athlete health and safety (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.-b). While this opportunity is afforded to those working in the Division III membership, those ADRs serving at Division I and Division II institutions are not provided with this type of professional development related to their role on campus. Although existing research has begun to acknowledge that some university presidents, often designated as the ADR, feel supported in their leadership roles, findings also suggest that many struggle to identify colleagues who fully understand the unique pressures associated with presidential responsibilities (Melidona et al., 2023). This gap points to a broader limitation in the current literature as little is known about how presidents, particularly those overseeing intercollegiate athletics, navigate the organizational demands of their positions. Presidents' identification of athletics as an area in which they

need additional support highlights a persistent gap in leadership preparation, particularly given the financial complexity and stakeholder pressures embedded in intercollegiate sports (Wollman & Weaver, 2023). A recent critical review of research on aspiring college presidents argues that the rapidly evolving higher education environment requires future presidents to develop broad strategic, financial, and relational competencies to meet the expanding demands of the role (Martin, 2021). This underscores the importance of examining the relationship between ADs, and ADRs, as ADRs must possess sufficient knowledge and strategic awareness to work effectively with the AD.

Historical research points to ADs focusing on goal achievement rather than interpersonal relationships (Branch, 1990), and contemporary studies suggest a shift toward valuing interpersonal relationships with supervisors for career advancement (Hancock & Hums, 2016). Perrow's (1973) work on communication and authority, along with Vroom and Yetton's (1973) decision-making models, underline the importance of these factors in AD-ADR interactions. Additionally, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2010) and the salience model (Mitchell et al., 1997) stress the complexity of managing diverse stakeholder interests, which could reveal significant differences in stakeholder prioritization between ADs and ADRs. For instance, recent research by Wood et al. (2019) reveals that contemporary ADs prioritize developing skills related to revenue generation, fundraising, and development, while they consider internal experiences like working with academic services and life skills to be less important. Additionally, Schein (2010) suggests organizational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping decision-making processes, as it determines norms, values, and priorities within the organization. Understanding these dynamics is essential for managing conflicts and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders (Ferkins et al., 2005). Understanding these dynamics will illuminate the nature of the communication patterns and stakeholder prioritization.

Method

Participants

After seeking IRB approval, the researchers administered the electronic survey instrument to both ADs and ADRs via email. Participants were instructed to click the link in the email if interested in participating in the survey. The survey link was active for a two-week period with a reminder email sent to participants following one week. Before participating, all respondents were provided with informed consent documents detailing the purpose of the study and their rights as participants.

Participants in this study were recruited from athletic department websites at NCAA member institutions. All ADs and ADRs in Divisions I, II, and III identified on the NCAA directory were solicited to participate in this study via email. Participants were selected based on their role within their respective organizations and their willingness to participate. The survey was sent to 893 ADs and 520 ADRs. The response rate for this survey was 10.9% from ADs and 8.3% from ADRs. In total, there were 97 ADs (Group 1) and 43 ADRs (Group 2) that completed the survey. The response rate for this survey was 10.9% from ADs and 8.3% from ADRs. When looking at AD respondents, 7.2% of participants were from Division I non-football institutions, 6.2% were from Division I FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision), 13.4% were from Division I FCS (Football Championship Subdivision), 20.6% were from Division II, and 52.6% were from Division III. When looking at ADR respondents, 2.3% were from Division I non-football institutions, 13.9% were from Division II, 81.4% were from Division III, and one respondent abstained from identifying their divisional level.

Survey Instrument

To assess the participants' perceptions of communication practices between ADs and their ADRs, a five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used. Findings from Elliott et al. (2023) informed the close-ended questions included in the final survey instrument. Specifically, common discussion topics identified in the qualitative study such as budget allocation, student-athlete wellbeing, and personnel decisions between ADs and ADRs informed close-ended Likert style items on the survey instrument. Survey items related to communication practices between the AD and ADR are included in Table 1.

To address the prioritization of stakeholders, the researchers incorporated the stakeholder groups identified in the exploratory study by Elliott et al. (2023) into the survey instrument. The stakeholder groups identified included Board of Regents/Trustees, boosters, coaches, enrollment, faculty, student-athletes, and sponsors/partners. Participants were asked to rank these stakeholder groups according to their level of prioritization.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using statistical software (SPSS). The dataset was initially screened for missing values and inconsistencies. Cases with incomplete responses were removed from the dataset. Missing values were excluded from the analysis to ensure the integrity of the reliability analysis. To support reliability of the results, two researchers completed the statistical tests independently and met after data analysis to discuss any inconsistencies. An independent samples t-test was used in this study to compare responses from both groups of participants for

the Likert scale questions on the survey instrument. Data from the Likert scale questions were coded based on the participants' response. Responses indicating the participant strongly agreed were coded as a 5 and responses indicating the participant strongly disagreed were coded as a 1. Levene's test was employed to assess the homogeneity of variances, and the results demonstrated that variances were consistent for the analysis ($p > 0.05$). In cases where the assumption of equal variances was not satisfied ($p < 0.05$) for the t-test analysis, the presence of unequal variances was explicitly reported.

Participants were also asked to rank stakeholder groups in order of importance from 1-8. The participants were asked to rank alumni, board of trustees, boosters, coaches, enrollment, faculty, student-athletes, and sponsors from least important (1) to most important (8). A Mann-Whitney U test was used to analyze the results reported from each group of participants, ADs and ADRs.

Results

Perceived Communication Practices

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the responses of Group 1 (ADs) and Group 2 (ADRs) on several survey items. The results are presented in Table 1.

ADRs ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 0.21$) reported significantly higher agreement that regular communication is important compared to ADs ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.47$), $t(134) = -2.48$, $p = .014$. This suggests ADRs agree more strongly on the importance of regular communication with ADs.

ADRs ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 0.29$) indicated significantly higher agreement with having a positive working relationship than ADs ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(134) = -3.04$, $p = .003$. This indicates ADRs more strongly agree that their working relationship with ADs is positive compared to how ADs feel about their relationship with ADRs.

ADRs ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.89$) expressed significantly higher agreement that sponsorship/partnership decisions should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR compared to ADs ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.92$), $t(134) = -4.26$, $p < .001$. ADRs agree more strongly on the importance of discussing sponsorship/partnership decisions with ADs.

ADRs ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.60$) showed significantly higher agreement that coach hiring and firing should be discussed between both groups to ADs ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(134) = -2.30$, $p = .023$. This suggests ADRs more strongly agree on the importance of involving both ADs and ADRs in coach hiring/firing discussions.

ADRs ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.55$) agreed significantly more than ADs ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.05$) that rubber-stamping decisions for routine purchases is acceptable in certain situations, $t(134) = -2.51$, $p = .013$. This indicates that ADRs more strongly agree with the acceptability of rubber-stamping for routine purchases compared to ADs.

ADRs ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.66$) expressed significantly stronger agreement that they have sufficient time to supervise athletics compared to ADs ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(134) = -4.35$, $p < .001$. This reflects a higher level of agreement from ADRs about their available time for supervision responsibilities than is perceived by ADs.

These results suggest that while some aspects of AD-ADR communication practices are viewed similarly by both groups, significant differences exist in perceptions of communication practices and the necessity of discussions on specific topics of communication. The findings highlight areas where communication and collaboration could be enhanced.

The Importance of Stakeholders

The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to assess whether there was a significant difference in the rankings of stakeholder group importance between ADs and ADRs. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed a statistically significant difference in the rankings of stakeholder group importance between ADs and ADRs related to enrollment ($U = 1,383$, $Z = -2.59$, $p = 0.1$). Therefore, we conclude that there was a significant difference in how ADs and ADRs perceive the importance of stakeholder groups. The table below presents a summary of the rankings of stakeholder groups for ADs and ADRs.

Table 1. Independent t-tests Comparing Group 1 (ADs) and Group 2 (ADRs) on Various Variables

Variable	Group 1 Mean (AD)	Group 1 (AD) SD	Group 2 (ADR) Mean	Group 2 (ADR) SD	t-statistic	p-value
Regular communication between AD and ADR is important.	4.81	0.47	4.95	0.21	-2.48	0.014*
I have a positive working relationship with my AD/ADR.	4.62	0.82	4.91	0.29	-3.04	0.003*
Personnel discussions should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR.	4.28	0.87	4.44	0.83	-1.05	0.297
Sponsorship/partnership discussions should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR.	3.43	0.92	4.14	0.89	-4.26	<.001*
Issues related to your designated conference (e.g., issues from an AD meeting) should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR.	4.20	0.84	4.30	0.74	-0.67	0.502
Budget allocation discussions should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR.	4.35	0.77	4.35	0.84	0.02	0.502
Student-athlete wellbeing discussions should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR.	4.15	0.73	4.30	0.77	-1.12	0.266
Coach hiring/firing discussions should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR.	4.39	0.93	4.70	0.60	-2.30	0.023*
There are times an ADR rubber-stamping a decision would be acceptable regarding student-athlete wellbeing (automatic approval or authorization without going up the full chain of command).	4.14	0.74	3.91	0.92	1.57	0.12
There are times an ADR rubber-stamping a decision would be acceptable regarding personnel (automatic approval or authorization without going up the full chain of command).	3.79	1.07	3.49	1.10	1.51	0.134
There are times when an ADR rubber-stamping a decision would be acceptable regarding travel requests (automatic approval or authorization without going up the full chain of command).	4.06	0.91	4.16	0.75	-0.62	0.536
There are times an ADR rubber-stamping a decision would be acceptable regarding budget allocation (automatic approval or authorization without going up the full chain of command).	4.01	0.87	3.84	0.84	1.09	0.278
There are times an ADR rubber-stamping a decision would be acceptable regarding routine purchase requests (automatic approval or authorization without going up the full chain of command).	4.19	1.05	4.53	0.55	-2.51	0.013*
I feel my ADR has time to supervise athletics.	3.50	1.17	4.19	0.66	-4.35	<.001*

* $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance

Table 2. Stakeholder Prioritization

Stakeholder Group	ADs Ranking (Mean)	ADRs Ranking (Mean)	Significance
Alumni	4.76	5.12	0.25
Board of Trustees	4.32	4.83	0.19
Boosters	4.92	5.52	0.08
Coaches	3.48	3.45	0.70
Enrollment	4.58	3.60	0.01*
Faculty	5.30	4.76	0.72
Student-Athletes	3.22	2.83	0.30
Sponsors	5.42	5.88	0.32

Note: The ranking is out of 8.0 (based on the number of stakeholder groups) and 8.0 is the highest ranking.

* $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the perceptions of ADs and ADRs on several key aspects of their communication practices. The results revealed both significant and non-significant differences between the two groups, offering important insights into areas of alignment and divergence in their views.

Related to RQ1, results highlight that ADRs consistently demonstrate stronger agreement than ADs in areas related to the importance of communication, positive working relationships, collaborative decision-making on key issues (such as sponsorships and coach hiring), and the acceptability of streamlined decision processes. Additionally, ADRs express greater agreement that they have adequate time to supervise athletics compared to the perceptions of ADs. However, the significant difference in responses to “I have a positive working relationship with my ADR” suggests that, despite recognizing the importance of communication, ADs may feel less satisfied with the quality of their working relationship compared to ADRs. This discrepancy could be due to differences in expectations or experiences of communication quality, which warrants further exploration. The expertise in athletics-related matters by the AD as compared to that of a senior level administrator assigned to overseeing the AD, namely the ADR, could also be a factor in the varied perception of the working relationship. Interviews with university presidents highlight the critical role of communication and coordinated oversight with athletic leadership, with two presidents noting that they manage and communicate with their athletic directors similarly

to how they do with academic deans (Belzer et al., 2016). These insights support the study's findings that ADRs report stronger agreement than ADs regarding communication, collaborative decision-making, and supervision, suggesting that differences in role expectations and experiences may influence perceptions of working relationships.

The study also highlighted divergent views on decision-making processes, particularly in the context of routine and strategic decisions. The significant difference in responses to "Sponsorship/partnership discussions should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR" and "Coach hiring and firing decisions should require a discussion between the AD and the ADR" indicates that ADs are less likely to believe these discussions should always involve both parties, compared to ADRs. Although this study did not reveal any statistically significant difference in how ADs and ADRs ranked the importance of sponsors, this could suggest that ADs prefer a more autonomous approach in certain decision-making areas, such as sponsors.

Chelladurai's (2007) conceptual framework may provide insights into the multifaceted nature of decision-making processes within organizations and the need for collaborative decision-making between the AD and the ADR. The framework recognizes how both external and internal influences shape decisions at various levels. External forces exert pressure on organizations, compelling them to respond strategically. This often applies to sponsorship fit considerations. With the visibility of athletic department sponsors, the disparity in perceived importance of communication could be critical. For example, the ADR may be more concerned with the sponsorship fit or the potential impact of that sponsorship on other academic partnerships or university-level sponsors, as opposed to the AD's priority of increasing athletics' revenue. Further, with the looming implications of the new name, image, and likeness (NIL) opportunities for student-athletes, an important stakeholder group, external-facing factors, such as school-specific NIL collectives, may present universities with additional considerations regarding support, access, transfer decisions, student-athlete retention, and more. In an interview with Athletic Director U, Devin Crosby, athletic director at Lynn University, stated, "In general, I believe presidents and athletics directors must be able to articulate the respective matters of the university. A few decades ago, a donor, media member or other constituent may not have pursued a response from the president regarding athletic matters. Conversely, the athletics director may not have been as engaged with the university units outside of the athletics department. Yet, because of the fundamental mission of college athletics, as well as its propensity to attract large amounts of media coverage, both parties should be able to speak to departmental issues that have a direct effect on the university and its brand" (Belzer et al., 2016, p. 1). As Clarkson (1995) suggests, stakeholders

gain power as they demonstrate the ability to exert significant control and influence over intercollegiate athletics. Thus, related to the student-athlete as a stakeholder, their control and influence in light of NIL may change drastically at certain levels and within certain sports. Community-facing decisions that have external implications may require more ADR involvement and insight, while internal factors may be able to be handled more heavily by the AD. This finding aligns with early research from Perrow (1973) suggesting non-routine operations need interpersonal communication, while internal operations may be able to be handled more directly by the AD.

Decisions that are more routine and/or are less community-facing and often have fewer external implications can allow for decision-making to happen by trusting the AD to govern within their knowledge and expertise without the ADR's involvement. As found by LeCrom and Pratt (2016), trust and communication are vital to the relationship between an AD and the institution's president; likewise, given the ADR is often an administrator such as the university president, this concept is relatable. For example, new work-from-home policies within the athletics department or new expense report procedures are processes that stay within the organization and have minimal media reach. If trust and communication between the AD and ADR is established, the AD will have more autonomy over such decisions.

The item "I feel my ADR has time to supervise athletics" revealed another significant difference, with ADs perceiving their ADRs as less available for supervisory duties. This perception gap could stem from ADRs having a broader set of responsibilities, leading to a mismatch in expectations about their role in athletic supervision. This finding suggests a need for clearer role delineation and perhaps a re-evaluation of workload distribution to ensure that ADRs can fulfill their supervisory roles effectively.

Related to RQ2, stakeholder prioritization is not only a vital part of athletic department success, but of overall institutional success as well. In this study, one of eight stakeholder groups was ranked significantly different by the AD and ADR—enrollment. Thus, discrepancy does exist between the AD and ADR regarding stakeholder group importance, and this conflict could play a role in the perceived differences regarding communication practices. According to an early survey of Division III ADRs conducted by the NCAA Athletics Direct Report Working Group in 2015, the majority of respondents expressed interest in attending professional development conferences to discuss key issues, with enrollment identified as one of the topics of greatest interest (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.-b). A more developed conversation related to enrollment and

the overall strategic plan of the university may help bridge the gap on stakeholder prioritization as it relates to enrollment. Likewise, an understanding of the university's strategic plan and the AD's and ADR's respective roles in implementing that plan may be key as well.

Healthy AD-ADR communication practices are critical to the effectiveness of member institutions across all divisional levels. Identifying and increasing areas of autonomy for the AD could lead to a more effective and positive work environment. Accordingly, identifying areas of disconnect between these two roles in the perceived need for communication and stakeholder prioritization can allow for improvements to their working relationship. Table 3 highlights practical recommendations for moving toward positive AD-ADR communication practices.

Table 3. Practical Recommendation's for the AD/ADR Relationship on Campus

Practical Recommendation	Application
The NCAA/conference offices should facilitate structured and consistent communication for the working relationship between ADs and ADRs	Given the shared understanding of the importance of regular communication between ADs and ADRs, the NCAA or individual conference offices should establish formal, structured communication best practices, such as scheduled meetings at the NCAA Convention or the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics Conference. This would ensure that both ADs and ADRs remain aligned on key issues and can address any concerns promptly.
Clarify role responsibilities and expectations of the AD and ADR	To address the divergent views on the involvement in sponsorship and partnership discussions, member institutions should develop protocol for sponsorship solicitation. If the AD's role includes sponsorship solicitation, the ADR and AD should discuss challenges and opportunities and outline expectations for sponsorship solicitation with the understanding that there will be guidelines – for example, national sponsors may require more formal approval.
NCAA and conference offices could work to provide training on effective collaboration	NCAA DIII works to support a Division III Athletics Direct Report Professional Development Program. Other divisions may find it advantageous to conduct similar programming for their member institutions to better assist the communication between the AD and the ADR based on each division's goals for the member institutions.
Create guidelines for decision-making authority	To address the discrepancies in views on decision-making autonomy, particularly for routine tasks, developing clear guidelines that outline when ADRs should be involved versus when AD can act independently could streamline processes and reduce potential friction.
Ensure adequate time for supervisory duties	The significant difference in perceptions of ADRs' availability to supervise athletics highlights the need to reassess workload distribution. Allocating specific time for supervisory responsibilities or adjusting the overall workload of ADRs could help them better meet expectations in this area.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample for both survey groups skewed heavily toward participants from Divisions II and III, limiting the generalizability of the findings to Division I contexts. As NIL policies are expected to affect Division I programs more intensely, additional research that includes a more robust Division I sample is warranted. Future research could expand upon the findings of this study and identify additional discussion areas and/or stakeholder groups that could influence the AD-ADR communication practices. A limitation to the study results may include the unequal group sizes between ADs ($n = 97$) and ADRs ($n = 43$). Specifically, the smaller sample size for ADRs might have reduced the ability to detect significant differences in certain variables. Future research should aim to balance group sizes more evenly to strengthen the robustness of the findings.

Additionally, further research could help athletic leaders, including both ADs and ADRs, better support the student-athlete stakeholder group in preparing for post-graduation careers. Jolly et al. (2024) found that domestic college student-athletes develop stronger leadership skills compared to their international peers and emphasized the need for targeted programming for this stakeholder group. Building on this work, future studies could examine how the relationship between ADs and ADRs influences the development and implementation of programs that support student-athlete growth and success.

Finally, future research could be conducted on stakeholder prioritization. This would allow a deeper investigation into the rationale behind the prioritization of stakeholders and attempt to answer the question of why some were ranked higher or lower than others by ADs-ADRs.

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