Initiating Institutional Redirection: Factors for De-escalation of Commitment in Division I Athletic Departments

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Given the ever-changing landscape of intercollegiate athletics, university administrators must constantly reexamine the direction of their athletic programs. Despite evidence suggesting limited profitability of athletic endeavors, many institutions sustain investment in Division I athletics. Yet, select institutions have reconsidered their commitment to Division I athletics and chosen to de-escalate from what they have deemed failing courses of action. While prior research has investigated organizations remaining committed to failing courses of action, limited research has considered the factors for reversing such behavior. Based on the theoretical framework of escalation of commitment, the purpose of this study was to investigate the factors for initiating de-escalation of commitment within the context of Division I athletics. Phone interviews were conducted with decision makers (n = 32) involved in the development and implementation of institutional de-escalation initiatives at eight institutions (N = 8). Data collected revealed three primary themes regarding factors for de-escalation in Division I athletics: (a) resource commitment, (b) student-athlete experience, and (c) philosophical inconsistency. Implications from this investigation speak to the necessity of institutions to consider alternative courses of action given the increasing level of commitment with Division I athletic participation.[1]

Organizational decision makers regularly encounter situations regarding the extent of continued commitment to a failing project or course of action, oftentimes maintaining a given course amidst evidence indicating a lack of economic viability (Brockner, 1992; Schmidt & Calantone, 2002). Due to several determinants encouraging sustained commitment, decision makers commonly persist in said behavior, eventually becoming entrapped in a cycle of failing courses of action termed by management theorists as "escalation of commitment" (Ross & Staw, 1993). Amidst an economic climate producing extensive institutional budget reductions, higher learning institutions continue investing scarce resources in athletic operations. Within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), participation in the Division I classification offers the premier level of competition, consequently requiring significant resource allotment

(NCAA, 2012). Although research provides evidence of the limited potential for profitability among Division I participants (Fulks, 2012), several institutions have recently announced the decision to increase their commitment to Division I athletics by division or association reclassification (e.g., Abilene Christian University, University of Incarnate Word, Northern Kentucky University), addition of a football program (e.g., Kennesaw State University, Georgia State University, Houston Baptist University), or football program subdivision transition (e.g., Old Dominion University, Texas State University, University of Massachusetts-Amherst).

Although many institutions exhibit escalation behavior, select Division I institutions have elected to de-escalate their commitment to athletics. Given the increasing number of institutions investing in Division I athletic programs and the limited number of institutions decreasing Division I investment, research investigating the baseline justifications for commitment reduction is warranted. Accordingly, the purpose of this investigation was to examine the factors for initiating de-escalation of commitment among eight Division I institutions. Amidst awareness of the dubious economic climate, extent of resources necessary for participation, and few higher learning institutions indicating a willingness to employ de-escalation measures, the Division I setting provided a suitable environment for examining commitment reduction.

Theoretical Framework

Developed by Staw (1976), escalation of commitment theory proposes that individuals and organizations have the potential to become entrapped in failing courses of action amidst negative evidence and feedback. As detailed by Ross and Staw (1993), escalation theory consists of the interplay among five determinants over a period of time. Initially applied in the examination of the Long Island Lighting Company's commitment to the construction of the Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant, these determinants—project, psychological, social, organizational, and contextual—stimulate continued commitment to a given project or course of action. Commonly identified in public policy and strategic management literature, research on the escalation phenomenon is abundant, spanning several disciplines (see Arkes & Blummer, 1985; Astebro, Jeffrey, & Adomdza, 2007; Brockner, 1992; Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Staw & Ross, 1987; Teger, 1980). Due to this expansive body of literature, recent inquiry has considered the means for de-escalating organizational commitment from a failing course of action. De-escalation of commitment comprises a "radical rescoping or redefining" (Montealegre & Keil, 2000, p. 418) of a failing course of action, with the resulting action fulfilled by a commitment reversal "either through project termination or redirection" (Keil & Robey, 1999, p. 65).

Research on de-escalation of commitment is currently limited to a series of laboratory-based experiments and single instrumental case studies (Mähring, Keil, Mathiassen, & Pries-Heje, 2008). Based on a thorough review of the existing de-escalation literature, Mähring et al. (2008) revealed only a dozen investigations into de-escalation implementation, primarily within the disciplines of information technology, strategic management, public policy, and law. In an attempt to explain de-escalation behavior within the information technology context, Keil and Robey (1999) revealed seven factors impacting redirection progression, with Montealegre and Keil (2000) providing seven additional triggering activities promoting said behavior. Within the intercollegiate athletics context, only two studies have empirically investigated escalation and de-escalation behavior (see Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010; 2011). Following an introductory case study of Southern Methodist University's continued commitment to Division I athletics (see Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010), Bouchet and Hutchinson (2011) conducted a follow-up case study

investigating the circumstances surrounding Birmingham-Southern's decision to de-escalate by reclassifying from Division I to Division III.

Using the escalation determinants set forth by Ross and Staw (1993) as a framework, Bouchet and Hutchinson (2011) chronicled the events associated with the transition to Division III. However, due to the nature of this single instrumental case study, broad-based implications were difficult to generalize to alternate institutional scenarios. Further, and likely more important, was the limiting of de-escalation behavior to only divisional reclassification. Therefore, this investigation sought to understand the factors for de-escalation behavior amidst several institutions, further expanding the avenues of de-escalation by examining alternate modes of redirection implementation.

De-escalation Operationalization in Division I Athletics

The current landscape of Division I athletics has resulted in an ongoing dilemma for university decision makers concerning the most appropriate extent of intercollegiate athletics commitment (Grasgreen, 2012; Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008). Given the previously identified definition of de-escalation, including both project abandonment and redirection, this investigation determined de-escalation behavior to comprise three categories within Division I participation: (a) divisional reclassification, (b) discontinuation of the football program, and (c) athletic department structural modification. Based on prior escalation and de-escalation of commitment investigations, the following criteria were applied to each category.

Reclassification. The divisional reclassification category comprised NCAA institutions having reclassified away from Division I by competing in a lower NCAA classification (e.g., Division II, Division III) or an alternate athletic association (e.g., National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, United States Collegiate Athletic Association, National Junior College Athletic Association). In the United States, higher education institutions housing intercollegiate athletic programs reside within an athletic governing association. As the most popular, the NCAA offers institutions three classifications (Division I, Division II, Division III) in which to compete. Significant differences exist among the divisions, with Division I requiring the highest amount of resource commitment (Brown, 2010). Examples of additional Division I resource commitment include, but are not limited to, the distribution of athletic grants-in-aid (i.e., athletic scholarships), minimum number of institutional sport team offerings, minimum number of non-Division I opponents, and, given football program sponsorship, suitable membership within one of the two football subdivisions (NCAA, 2012).

Removal. The discontinuation of the football program category characterizes institutions that have removed their Division I football program as an institutional sport offering. Within the NCAA, Division I football is separated into two groupings: Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). As with the differences between divisions, the primary distinction between the FBS and FCS is the commitment and allotment of resources. For instance, the number of offered grants-in-aid for the FCS is limited to 63, while the FBS can offer up to 85. However, increasing operating costs result in fiscal difficulty in maintaining a Division I football program as program profitability is predicated upon substantial revenue generation. Throughout the seven-year period from 2004 to 2010, research by Fulks (2010) revealed no more than 50 percent to 60 percent of FBS programs attaining profitability, dropping said percentage range to 25 percent to 30 percent upon accounting for FCS programs, none of

which achieved profitability. Given these figures, select institutions have elected to discontinue their Division I football program.

Restructure. The final category pertains to institutions having implemented a structural modification to the athletic department. Although institutions within this category maintained the existing Division I status and did not remove any sport offerings, de-escalation was achieved via alternative structural adaptations. The most appropriate example has been provided by Vanderbilt University in their controversial 2003 athletic department transformation. Due to the nature of athletic operations becoming "isolated and disassociated from the university" (Zillgitt, 2004, p. 1), Vanderbilt modified its traditional structure by eliminating the formal athletic department leadership and integrating athletics within the Division of Student Life and University Affairs. Accordingly, this unconventional model of Division I athletics oversight merits examination as an alternative means for institutional de-escalation.

Given the aforementioned theoretical framework and operationalization of Division I athletics de-escalation, the following research question guided this investigation: What factors caused Division I institutions to initiate de-escalation efforts in order to reduce their commitment to intercollegiate athletics?

Method

Research Context

Based on public records and NCAA inquiry, a list of Division I institutions fulfilling the criterion described were compiled. In order to provide the most recent cases of athletic de-escalation, the sample drawn was limited to the last 10 years (2003-2012). As will be detailed, the only exception to this date range pertains to Division I FBS institutions, as no FBS institutions de-escalated within this 10-year period. As documented by Wieberg (2010), six institutions have reclassified away from Division I since the NCAA's 1973 three division distinction, with only two doing so in the last 10 years: Birmingham-Southern College in 2006 and Centenary College of Louisiana in 2011. Accordingly, both institutions were examined in this study.

Within the discontinuation of the football program category, several Division I FBS and FCS institutions have removed the sport of football. As noted, recent examples of Division I FBS institutions discontinuing their football program were non-existent, with no such institutional action occurring post-2000. Therefore, institutions discontinuing their football program within the 1990's decade were also included to maintain a comprehensive dataset. Of the three FBS institutions removing the sport of football since 1990, two were included in this investigation: Long Beach State University in 1991 and University of the Pacific in 1995. Within the FCS, eight institutions have discontinued their football program since 2003. Although each institution was contacted, only three were included in this investigation: East Tennessee State University in 2003, La Salle University in 2007, and Northeastern University in 2009. Lack of institutional inclusion for the remaining five institutions was a result of (a) requests to not be included in the study, or (b) an inability to locate former institutional decision makers. The athletic department structural modification category included only one Division I institution: Vanderbilt in 2003. Discussion with athletic administrators and fellow faculty members resulted in Vanderbilt's inclusion due to the potential value provided from their non-traditional management approach.

Data Sources

Due to widespread quantitative laboratory-based investigations of escalation-related research, Staw and Ross (1987) recommended the incorporation of field-based qualitative case studies. With particular relevance to de-escalation research, recent investigations have implemented said approach via single instrumental (or cases recognized in illuminating a problem) case studies (e.g., Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2011; Keil & Mähring, 2010; Mähring & Keil, 2008; Montealegre & Keil, 2000). Further, Montealegre and Keil (2000) have encouraged additional qualitative case study research in alternative organizational contexts, noting de-escalation as unfolding differently given circumstantial events. Therefore, in an effort to provide a more broad-based understanding of de-escalation, this investigation employed a collective (or multiple) case study of eight Division I athletic departments, further maintaining procedural replication for each case in order to ensure accuracy and consistency (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007; Yin, 2003).

The nature of qualitative case study design also incorporates several sources of data, with emphasis on human-to-human interaction and tangible (physical) objects (Yin, 2003). Direct interviewing via telephone was the primary data collection method. This method was applied alongside use of relevant documents and records. The well-chronicled nature of Division I athletics documented in several outlets (e.g., media, public records) allowed for examination of multiple data sources, including popular press articles/documents, institutional reports, faculty senate minutes, Board of Trustee/regent minutes, and public records (e.g., community letters).

Participants

Purposive criterion sampling was utilized for participant selection (Creswell, 1998). In accordance with Ross and Staw (1993), participants were determined on the following two criteria: (a) individuals with athletics decision-making authority, and (b) individuals with redirection implementation responsibility (e.g., administrators tasked with implementing the change). Among the eight institutions, the final number of participants ($N = 32$) consisted of African-American ($n = 2$), Caucasian ($n = 29$), and Hispanic ($n = 1$) individuals. Examples of participant positions included President, Provost, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Vice President for Administration, Vice President for Finance, Vice President for Enrollment, Faculty Athletic Representative, Athletic Director, Senior Associate Athletic Director, and Associate Athletic Director.

At the request of several participants, generic identifiers (e.g., academic administrator, athletic administrator) were applied to maintain participant confidentiality. Soliciting participants comprised one (or more) of three steps. Correspondence was initiated by contacting the Faculty Athletic Representative (FAR) at each institution. The FAR provided an academic avenue into the most appropriate means for connecting with executive administrators. Given non-response from the FAR, the next step involved contacting the institutional Sport Management-related program coordinator. Given non-response or lack of a Sport Management-related program, executive athletic and academic administrators were contacted in an effort to assist with identifying decision makers associated with the de-escalation process.

Table 1 - Demographic Information of Participants.

Category	Institution ($N = 8$)	Sample ($n = 32$)
Reclassification	Centenary College of Louisiana	4
	Birmingham-Southern College	5
Removal (FCS)	Northeastern University	3
	La Salle University	3
	East Tennessee State University	5
Removal (FBS)	University of the Pacific	3
	Long Beach State University	4
Restructure	Vanderbilt University	5

Interview Guide and Data Collection

Based on former de-escalation investigations (see Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2011; Mähring et al., 2008; Montealegre & Keil, 2000), nine questions were included along with several supporting questions. Upon beginning the interview with two grand tour questions, subsequent questions pertained to the primary factors for de-escalation, eliciting key events and a corresponding timeline along the way. Interview guide questions included, but were not limited to, "What is the objective/purpose of intercollegiate athletics at your institution?", "What factors contributed to the Division I redirection at your institution?", "What were the benefits of Division I participation at your institution?", "What were the negatives associated with Division I participation at your institution?", and "Identify and describe important events influencing the decision to redirect Division I participation?"

Upon IRB approval and participant consent to participate, interviewees were provided (a) documentation of the external granting organization, (b) an information sheet, and (c) the interview guide. Telephone interviews were conducted in an office environment, with each lasting between 25 and 70 minutes. The nature of interviews being conducted via telephone had no noticeable impact on data collection, as participants encouraged follow-up conversations for additional clarification. In an effort to ensure methodological trustworthiness, triangulation, audio-taping, transcription, peer debriefing, and member checking were administered. Fulfillment of triangulation requires the integration of several methods, researchers, and data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, this investigation utilized both multiple researchers and data sources (e.g., interviews and physical documents). Following individual participant interviews, audio-taped recordings were transcribed by a third party and confirmed by a researcher for accuracy. Subsequent member checking was implemented by e-mailing participants a verbatim transcript in order to confirm the accuracy and intent of responses. Upon review, a select few participants noted minor grammatical errors, all of which were corrected accordingly. Finally, peer debriefing was implemented to maintain objectivity and honesty

throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Peer debriefers included two individuals, one familiar with the nature of Division I intercollegiate athletics and one not familiar with the nature of Division I intercollegiate athletics.

Data Analysis

Prior to beginning the analysis, interview transcripts were uploaded and housed within NVivo 9. Data analysis adhered to a two-step process. The first step involved coding data into first-order codes related to the factors for institutional de-escalation. Examples of first-order codes included limited success, depleted fan base, athletic separation, value congruency, and conference home. The second step entailed distributing first-order codes into first-order categories (sometimes referred to as higher level nodes); in the case of this investigation, these first-order categories served as the resulting, over-arching themes. For example, codes pertaining to academic involvement, performance-based competitiveness, and student body integration were identified within the "student-athlete experience" category or theme.

Two coders followed a two-series sequence in data analysis: (a) identification of the total number of text units, followed by (b) independent categorization of said units into codes. In order to ensure accuracy and consistency among coders, two measures of intercoder reliability were administered in conjunction with coder analysis. In controlling for reliability, Guetzkow's U measures the consistency of total number of text units between two coders (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984), with values exceeding 0.1 indicating dubious agreement among coders. Calculations (Guetzkow $U = 0.04$) revealed a high degree of agreement between the two coders. Subsequent to accounting for coder agreement concerning the total number of text units, coders must categorize each unit within a given code. Therefore, the application of Cohen's kappa controls for chance agreements between, in this instance, two coders (Howell, 1992). A value in excess of 0.75 signifies high agreement between coders (Fleiss, 1981). Calculations ($= 0.81$) revealed high agreement between coders.

Findings and Discussion

Using escalation of commitment theory as a foundational framework, findings revealed three primary themes concerning de-escalation factors among the sampled Division I institutions: (a) resource commitment, (b) student-athlete experience, and (c) philosophical inconsistency. This section will discuss each theme regarding the justifications for institutional de-escalation initiation.

Resource Commitment

One of the central themes among sampled institutions concerned the resources necessary to maintain the existing commitment to Division I athletics. Seven of the eight institutions noted the lack of resources (e.g., financial, physical, human) impacting the decision to de-escalate athletics. In the cases of Birmingham-Southern, Centenary, Long Beach State, Pacific, and East Tennessee State, a primary driver for de-escalation pertained to the impact of external pressures on financially sustaining Division I commitment. The downtrodden economy provided de-escalation incentive to institutions such as Birmingham-Southern and Centenary who had long debated the potential for athletic modification (see Deford, 2007; McDonald, 2009). In addition

to prevailing philosophical arguments (i.e., athletics commitment perceived as contradicting the traditional mission, vision, and core values of a small, liberal arts institution), an academic administrator at Birmingham-Southern recalled the following: "the real impetus was the amount of money that was being spent on Division I athletics as opposed to the alternate model of Division III." This was confirmed by an athletic administrator at Centenary who noted a shift in existing discussions among Board of Trustee members and institutional decision makers:

> The debate escalated after 2008 when the endowment – like a lot of institutions that are heavily dependent on their endowment income – went down with the stock market and the economic downturn, then you have this alarm situation. Now, it's a financial consideration. Those individuals really change their focus from a philosophical argument to now it's a financial necessity that we make this kind of change in this area.

Decision makers at Long Beach State, Pacific, and East Tennessee State were also faced with environmental forces encouraging de-escalation. A prominent external pressure involved the financial difficulties associated with continually decreasing state appropriations and budget reductions. Political initiatives in the state of California (e.g., Proposition 13) resulted in substantial budget reallocations for higher education institutions in the 1990's, assigning a near 30 percent reduction in athletic department spending (Associated Press, 1995; Associated Press, 1991). According to one Long Beach State athletic administrator, the decision was eventually confined to two alternatives: "distribute them [budget cuts] across the board, or make a deep and narrow cut with regard to one program [football] being able to essentially absorb the entire cut." In similar fashion, East Tennessee State faced significant external pressure in the allowable allocation of state appropriation funds designated for athletics (Associated Press, 2003). Given the existing cost of the football program, exceeding $1 million annually, the decision was made to discontinue football participation.

In contrast to the above institutions, Northeastern and La Salle were not considered in dire financial circumstances prior to the removal of their football programs. In both cases, increasing physical and human resource commitments were deemed unreasonable in maintaining the existing commitment to Division I football participation. For Northeastern, institutional initiatives encouraging "selective excellence" resulted in the decision to discontinue the football program (ESPNBoston, 2009). To be discussed, such "selective excellence" called for an increase in their commitment to physical and human resources designated for football operations, both of which were undesirable expenditures. Of particular note was the current condition of the existing football stadium. An athletic administrator at Northeastern noted the significance of upgrading the facility in order to continue football participation:

> So when we did our evaluation of our football program, one of the things that was clear in terms of us delivering on that idea of a positive student-athlete experience and giving them the equal chance to go out and compete every Saturday was that our facility really needed to be improved significantly…and in the course of trying to research what that might be, it became clear that the investment that was going to be required was well beyond what was probably in the best interests of Northeastern as an institution. Given that I didn't feel like the status quo was an option going forward, in fairness to everybody as ironic as that sounds, we felt like the option we had was to discontinue the program, which we did.

Due to the urban geographic location of the Boston-based university, added difficulty arose in planning for facility expansion within the landlocked campus. La Salle also experienced geographic location obstacles, as their Philadelphia-based campus was not equipped for program expansion. In addition to essential physical resources, an athletic administrator at La Salle highlighted the necessity of additional human resources to maintain an acceptable Division I football program:

> It was an expense that we were incurring. We still didn't have locker rooms; we still didn't have enough trainers; we still didn't have a strength coach; we still didn't have a weight room that was big enough to accommodate at least a third of the team at one time. So, it was more a physical and human expense than it was a financial expense.

This theme provided the most prevalent justification for de-escalation among sampled institutions. As outlined by Ross and Staw (1993), project determinants typically represent the objective aspects of a project or course of action, highlighting the prevalence of economic or financial information in decision-making processes. Although continued escalation behavior is vulnerable to resource-related obstacles such as closing costs and salvage value, de-escalating institutions in this study provided evidence of accepting these consequences as short-term losses in exchange for long-term gain. Further, this finding also speaks to decision maker behavior disregarding traditional psychological determinants related to continuing a course of action in an attempt to recoup sunk costs or inaccurately slanting financial data in accordance with societal expectations or beliefs. Simply, decision makers acknowledged the unsustainable nature of the current resource commitment to athletics, opting to cut their current losses in anticipation of future benefits to both the athletic department and institution.

Student-athlete Experience

In addition to resource commitment, decision makers expressed the importance of providing student-athletes with a more well-rounded university experience (i.e., involvement in campus and community-related activities beyond athletics). Vanderbilt provided the most prominent example of ensuring student-athletes were more integrated within campus initiatives. Most notably, student-athletes were not afforded the time to participate in academic endeavors, such as on- or off-campus service groups and study abroad programs (Pope, 2009). Given the nature and structure of the then current athletics model, this was of great concern to all decision makers interviewed. According to an academic administrator:

> Vanderbilt's always had bright kids, but we felt like the bright kids and student-athletes were getting shortchanged from the entire experience. Coaches said, "Hey, if you're not in practice, you need to be in either class or in the weight room." And as we looked at that, what we really wanted was the kids to be in the sorority house or the fraternity house or to be on the honor council or be doing community service stuff. We wanted the kids to be kids, and felt strongly that they weren't getting the entire college experience, which is what we owed them as Vanderbilt kids.

According to those interviewed at Vanderbilt, a primary obstacle to enhancing the overall student-athlete experience was the "isolated and disassociated" nature of the existing athletics structure and chain of command with the remainder of the institution (Zillgitt, 2004, p. 1). As a result, this disconnect produced difficulty in ensuring athletic department operations were held accountable for, among other things, actions related to student-athlete involvement. Thus, a new system of checks and balances was needed for appropriate student-athlete integration and oversight. An academic administrator provided a brief overview of the subsequent institutional impact following the decision to de-escalate:

> What happened at the end was an outcome that we had hoped for and I think it has turned out to be true, and it was about accountability. So, at a place like Vanderbilt and other universities, the athletic department and athletic infrastructure is divorced enough from the rest of the university that the individuals who should be accountable for things like finance and academic performance often aren't. When something comes up with athletics, it becomes very easy to sit in a cabinet meeting and have all your senior people say, "Oh, well, you know, that's athletics. We don't have any control over it." Suddenly, in that cabinet, in that senior leadership meeting, the people around the table had very direct responsibility and accountability for various areas of athletics…and when we had both responsibility and accountability, we found better decisions being made quite frankly.

Northeastern also expressed the significance of the student-athlete experience in the abolishment of their football program, placing particular attention on performance-based competitiveness as a function of delivering a positive student-athlete experience. As described by an athletic administrator at Northeastern, the "positive student-athlete experience" could be delivered in several capacities, including "…showing them respect, making sure they have an opportunity to reach their full potential as athletes, helping them grow as people, making the experience at games fun and exciting, and helping them compete on equal footing..." However, performance-based competitiveness was considered a crucial element of providing said experience. According to the same athletic administrator: "And them [student-athletes] being able to feel like they can go out and win more on a regular basis is a part of delivering of that positive student-athlete experience."

Centenary provided an additional example of maintaining or enhancing the student-athlete experience in Division I redirection. In reclassifying to Division III, Centenary considered the quality of experience for the student-athletes. Although competing in Division I, there was a desire among decision makers to modify the existing student-athlete experience, primarily focusing on "them improving their skills, developing leadership skills, and a sense of responsibility." This quality was not necessarily defined by performance so much as the overall student-athlete experience. As noted by an academic administrator: "The quality is in a different form. It's not the quality of the product on the floor; it's the quality of the experience the young people have." However, a primary hindrance to ensuring a quality experience among all student-athletes was the drastic distinction between major sports and minor sports, eliciting one academic administrator to note the following:

> We had very poor student persistence [in basketball], and had had very poor student persistence for a number of years. Persistence in some of the minor sports—swimming,

cross-country—persistence was better. The sports in which we invested the most money had less student success than the sports in which we invested less money [2].

Although not the primary objective, an additional characteristic of a quality student-athlete experience did involve performance-based competitiveness. As the smallest institution competing in Division I, Centenary struggled to attain successful performance throughout the 1990's and into the 2011 reclassification (Bathe, 2011). As a result, the transition to Division III was intended and expected to assist in increasing the performance (i.e., winning percentage) of all athletic teams (Whiteside, 2011). According to an athletic administrator at Centenary: "The idea was always, 'We're going to go Division III. We're going to give our kids a better opportunity for postseason experiences, and to win. That's going to fuel spirit and fuel the campus culture.'"

Further, administrators noted the nature of the extensive Division I travel schedule due to conference affiliation as significantly impacting the student-athlete experience (Whiteside, 2011). Following a four-year period as a Division I independent, Centenary settled in the Mid-Continent Conference (later named the Summit League), a conference primarily comprised of Division I institutions in the Midwestern portion of the United States (Bathe, 2011). As a university located in Northwestern Louisiana, the taxing nature of such a travel schedule not surprisingly impacted several facets of student-athletes overall university experience. An academic administrator expounded on the impact of travel and conference affiliation on the overall student-athlete experience:

> So it was heavily financial, but I guess the final thing from a student experience standpoint was the conference that we were in. The conference we were in required extensive travel up into the Dakotas, Detroit, Chicago, Utah, and we were just—it was really being hard on our students. The conference had said they were going to have a southern extension strategy. In fact, they expanded to the north into the Dakotas, so it was a culmination of all of those factors.

Although this theme specifically provides evidence of the importance decision makers placed on the overall student-athlete experience, more broad de-escalation implications initially speak to decision maker disregard for psychological and social determinants of commitment. Traditionally, decision makers conducive to maintaining commitment to a course of action succumb to individual motivations to justify a losing course of action (Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Goltz, 1992; Staw, 1976) or maintain credibility among the vast majority of stakeholder groups (Fox & Staw, 1979). Although conclusive evidence was not provided from this set of data, this finding speaks to the potential emergence of more altruistic behavior among institutional decision makers, considering the student-athlete experience as paramount to their personal agenda or impression management.

Philosophical Inconsistency

The final theme pertained to the nature of Division I commitment lacking consistency and fit within select institutions. Although not noted by all institutions sampled, decision makers at four of the eight institutions spoke to the lack of fit and value congruency with their respective institution's mission, vision, and core values. As mentioned earlier, a 2007 initiative by the

President at Northeastern charged all institutional departments to conduct program-specific assessments as part of a campus-wide procedure emphasizing "selective excellence." These assessments were intended to provide decision makers objective clarity regarding the potential level of program performance (or therelackof), thus informing future investment or divestment (ESPNBoston.com, 2009). As a result, a task force conducted a review of the entire athletic department, gauging areas not conducive to excellence. An academic administrator recalled the nature of said discussions:

> We were putting together our long range plan as an institution around where we were going to place our bets, where we were going to make a deeper commitment, where we were going to expect programs to compete on a national stage, where we were going to be sure that every student-athlete had a quality experience…and it was really through that lens that one could begin to see that football required a substantial investment to bring it up to the level of play of our conference and that kind of experience…

In order to fulfill this commitment, a substantial resource investment, inclusive of physical, financial, and human resources, was necessary. Given the requisite resources necessary, the football program was not viewed as viable alternative moving forward.

Although all higher learning institutions strive to achieve and sustain academic notoriety, three institutions in this investigation—Birmingham-Southern, Centenary, Vanderbilt—are well-known for an established commitment to continued academic excellence and superiority. As liberal arts institutions with enrollments under 1,500 students, both Birmingham-Southern and Centenary confirmed a lack of institutional value congruency and fit within the Division I classification. At Birmingham-Southern, select Board of Trustee members and decision makers observed a divide between the values exhibited by the majority of Division I institutions and those displayed at Birmingham-Southern. According to an academic administrator, "Division III was more in line with our school values. Look, we were not a Division I school. We were a small, private liberal arts school. We have no business playing in a division with Auburn and Alabama." Due to the philosophy of traditionally small, liberal arts institutions, select Board of Trustee members and decision makers believed the college should be athletically positioned in accordance with its prestigious Phi Beta Kappa academic membership (D3football.com, 2006). At the time, many of the institutions sharing in Birmingham-Southern's Phi Beta Kappa chapter resided in the Division III classification. An athletic administrator elaborated on the concept put forth by those favoring the transition to Division III:

> There were a lot of people on the campus, including some of our key Board members, that didn't really relate to Division I, didn't understand why a little bitty small liberal arts college like Birmingham-Southern would be competing against big state universities; "Shouldn't we be competing against Millsap's and Sewanee and Rhodes and schools that are like we are?" And so philosophy was the other reason that we decided to change.

Likewise, Centenary indicated a philosophical disconnect between their academic status and existing Division I athletic participation. In similar fashion to Birmingham-Southern, Centenary cited their membership in the Associated Colleges of the South, a consortium of sixteen institutions (primarily Division III) committed to excellence and rigor in academic programs and student-athlete growth, as a principal element in considering the transition.

Although strained finances and lack of resources accounted for the predominant de-escalation justification, a Centenary decision maker identified the lack of philosophical and institutional fit as an additional, longstanding justification for the Division III transition:

> Well, it had been under review for many, many years, even before I got there. The real reason was the lack of fit for the type of institution we were. We were among the Associated Colleges of the South, which had mainly small liberal arts institutions like Furman, Davidson, Sewanee, Rhodes, and we felt the need to be more identified with that kind of core group as an institution.

Although maintaining Division I participation, the lack of athletics accountability at Vanderbilt was negatively impacting the student-athlete experience, further not living up to the educational philosophy desired. Decision makers emphasized the importance of mission, vision, and core value consistency throughout all institutional departments. Two academic administrators spoke to the importance of institutional mission, vision, and core values in the operation of the athletic department:

> ■ We need to be doing things that are in support of our mission and bring value to the university. So I think we want to ensure we are seen and operate within the confines of this as an institution of higher education—and athletics is one of those activities.

> ■ I also think that the focus of a great university is on the values, mission, and strategy. And it's kind of like, "Okay, well, this is crazy." You've got this model, but what's our mission? What's our vision? What's our strategy? We know what our values are… If you can get to the point where we all know what we want, and there will be support for that consistent with the mission and the values, it gets to be about structure and process, and things like that get to be secondary to, why are we in the educational world?

This finding confirms recent research regarding institutional mission, vision, and core value inconsistency in athletic operations (see Cooper & Weight, 2012; Cooper & Weight, 2011; Hutchinson & Bennett, 2012). As evidenced, administrators exhibited concern regarding the direction of athletics commitment in accordance with the overall philosophy of higher education at their institution. Contrary to the majority of Division I participating institutions, administrators at these four universities underscored the importance of mission, vision, and core value consistency by initiating de-escalation action. For the collective institution as a whole, this finding speaks to the necessity of administrative leadership managing athletics in light of the established mission, vision, and core values of the institution. Given athletic operations deviation from the mission, vision, and core values, administrators should consider redirecting the existing commitment. This finding also has the potential to confirm former evidence of decision maker disregard for psychological and social determinants of commitment in considering the interests of students and the institution over individual agenda and career advancement.

Conclusion

This investigation sought to examine the factors for initiating de-escalation of commitment to Division I athletics by means of a collective case study of eight institutions. Findings revealed three primary themes related to de-escalation initiation among sampled institutions: (a) resource commitment, (b) student-athlete experience, and (c) philosophical inconsistency. Although this study provides an initial framework for institutions contemplating commitment de-escalation, findings also indicate the potentially extreme measures necessary for commitment reduction amidst upper echelon Division I institutions (e.g., Division I non-scholarship football, multiple sport offering removal).

The findings and implications from this investigation speak to three primary areas of future research. First, this investigation only considered the factors for Division I de-escalation, omitting details of the process for de-escalation achievement. Future research should consider de-escalation progression, specifically investigating the triggering activities promoting de-escalation achievement and examining the emergence of situational obstacles. Second, findings alluded to a rare instance related to decision maker disregard for personal agenda or impression management tactics in the decision to de-escalate. On the surface, it would appear that de-escalation implementation provides limited personal benefit to overseeing administrators, as the impact would likely only provide negative feedback and impact from committed stakeholders. This leads to the third and final topic for future research, that of the motivation among decision makers for disregarding personal agendas and impression management. Escalation research has identified maintaining personal credibility among stakeholders as a primary psychological and social determinant in sustaining commitment to a failing course of action. Future research should consider the motives behind making such an unpopular and unconventional de-escalation decision among institutional administrators.

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Notes

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2. The term "persistence" referred to the extent of success in given sport offerings.