The arms race of intercollegiate athletic expenditures (Knight Commission, 2004) continues to grow as conference realignments, multi-billion dollar television agreements, and superstar amateur athletes dominate the headlines (Zagier, 2010). Despite a reality revealing that only a handful of programs produce profits (NCAA, 2009), this empire of commercialism stands as the most visible product of the administrative reward system in intercollegiate athletics. While the empire has risen, many Olympic sport traditions have fallen as “non-revenue” programs have been eliminated. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the “revenue” and “nonrevenue” program elements that are most highly valued by NCAA Division I athletic administrators to broaden the understanding of athletic department administrative theory and to facilitate an effort to develop strategic measures to counter program discontinuation.

Institutional theory postulates that organizations, like individuals, seek approval or legitimacy from their peers. As such, organizations tend to behave in ways that are consistent with the actions and orientations of the organizations within their institutional sphere. An important element of institutional theory proposes that organizations within the same social system are influenced by one another and tend to imitate one another (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991; Scott, 2001.). University athletic departments within the same conference, for example, are likely to espouse similar core values, offer the same kinds of services, support a similar organizational structure, and prioritize budgets in a similar fashion (Chelladurai, 2005). The process of organizations becoming similar to one another is called institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Based on a review of inquiries measuring organizational value systems (Amos & Weathington, 2008; De Clercq, Fontaine, & Ansel, 2008), a 17-item survey instrument was developed and utilized to identify the program values that are rated most important by senior-level administrators within NCAA athletic departments. The specific target of NCAA program values had not been examined directly or indirectly in previous research, however, and as a result there was a need to address the construct validity of the research instrument. Thus, the current study utilized a panel of experts (four senior-level intercollegiate athletic administrators, two professors, and an expert in research and survey design) to ensure that the instrument’s content was sound based on the purpose of the research.

The survey instrument was distributed via email to each of the NCAA athletic departments featured at the Division I level (342 institutions). The staff directories on each of the related athletic websites were used to identify the head athletic directors at each of the institutions. Because of the unique nature of the research, the decision was made to break the study into two phases: the “nonrevenue,” Olympic phase and the “revenue-producing” phase. During the first phase, the administrators were asked to rate their perceptions of the most important program values within “nonrevenue,” Olympic sports. Following a two-month lapse of the initial email invitation, a total of 155 (45.3%) NCAA Division I programs had responded to the survey. In addition, during the second phase, administrators were asked to respond to the same program values when focusing on “revenue-producing” sports. Following the same two-month lapse, there were a total of 93 (27.2%) NCAA Division I programs that responded to the survey.

Overall, the results illustrated that there were certain values that were consistently rated high by Division I administrators in both nonrevenue, Olympic and revenue producing sport programs (e.g., conduct, academics, athletic success, personal relationships). In addition to the similar value sets, the data illustrated the unique differences in athletic director perceptions of program values when focusing on the two types of sport programs. In particular, the investigation revealed that NCAA Division I administrators rated the following commercial program values as having a more important emphasis in “revenue” sports than in “nonrevenue” sports: (a) fan support \(F (1, 246) = 78.89, p < .01\), fundraising \(F (1,243) = 25.58, p < .01\), and revenue production \(F (1,243) = 120.67, p < .01\). Similarly, the administrators also rated athletics \(F (1, 247) = 4.596, p < .05\) as significantly more important in “revenue” sports than in “nonrevenue” sports.

The primary underpinning of institutional theory is that an organization tends to emulate the other organizations in the sphere of organizational association (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This implementation has been seen in action within the arms race in intercollegiate athletics, and it is seen in the value placed on sport programs researched within this study. The small standard deviations and clear agreement the athletic directors demonstrated in valuing social and competitive conduct followed by academic and athletic success supports the theory of institutional isomorphism. In an era where the educational mission of intercollegiate athletics is in question (Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2007), many proclaim the educational mission to be lost. The findings reveal the educational values (including conduct and academic achievement) within intercollegiate athletics to

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be quite strong – significantly valued in all divisional affiliations. What we see, however, is an athletic organism that has morphed into a divided system. Each school mimicking one another in the arms race of expenditures in their revenue sports with significant emphasis placed on fan support, fundraising, and revenue production (KCIA, 2010), while maintaining untainted core values in the Olympic sports.