

**Toward Predicting Escalation of Commitment: Normalizing Determinants in Intercollegiate Athletic Departments**

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Within organizational environments, sustained commitment to a given endeavor has often resulted in a cycle of continued investment and eventual entrapment in a failing course of action (Drummond, 1994; Ross & Staw, 1993; Staw, 1981). The context of intercollegiate athletics is of particular interest with recent data suggesting only a small percentage of programs are financially self-sustaining (Fulks, 2011). Yet, athletic department budgets continue to increase and institutions are spending significant amounts of resources to bolster their athletic programs. Although research by Bouchet and Hutchinson (2010) has highlighted individual institutional rationales for continued investment in Division I athletics (e.g., university branding, perceived stakeholder status), additional research is needed to further understand and measure scenarios of possible escalation of commitment in intercollegiate athletics. The purpose of this study is to identify consistent determinants of escalation behavior within Division I athletic departments and subsequently develop a scale for further assisting in identifying and measuring instances of escalation of commitment.

Based on escalation of commitment theory, organizations and individuals often engage in and remain invested in costly projects and courses of action despite evidence that would suggest these are failing endeavors (Staw, 1976). Early research within the organizational context demonstrated that personal responsibility for a failing course of action often led to increased investment in an initiative as opposed to withdrawal and acceptance of a loss (Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Staw, 1974). Staw (1976) further demonstrated two chief principles concerning escalation behavior: 1) one would anticipate individuals to modify behavior(s) that result in negative consequences, and 2) self-justification plays a significant role in decision-making processes leading to the escalation behavior.

Within the context of intercollegiate athletics, institutions often commit to levels of athletic participation exceeding the boundaries of their economic feasibility. With the rising costs of necessary resources for Division I competition, the decision to invest additional institutional funds into athletic programs is increasingly important as a substantial portion of such expenditures may ultimately never be recovered. This study seeks to further understand the underlying forces of escalation, with the primary goal being the development of a scale to measure and predict such escalation of commitment. To date, no scale of escalation of commitment is present in the sport management literature.

In order to achieve the purpose of this study, a mixed methods approach will be implemented. The first phase consists of qualitative means to provide further insight into the determinants of escalation behavior. Specifically, we build upon the previous work of Bouchet and Hutchinson (2010) by further exploring how athletic departments may find themselves in situations of escalating commitment. Data collected from this initial phase will subsequently inform the creation of an escalation of commitment scale. As such, the second phase utilizes quantitative means to refine the scale, while also testing for validity and reliability.

Phase one adheres to a collective case study methodology, examining escalation among select institutions within the past ten years (2003-2012). Based on previous investigation, two primary categories of escalation behavior within Division I athletics were established: a) institutional reclassification, and b) institutions adding a football program. This study excluded Division I football programs competing in the Ivy League, Pioneer Football League, and Patriot League due to their non-scholarship football status.

For purposes of this investigation, interviews and documents are the sources of data utilized. In an effort to access individuals (N = 40-50) who have an understanding of the decision-making processes regarding subject matter at both the university and athletic department levels, purposive criterion sampling was implemented for interviewee

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selection. Such decision makers includes board of regents/trustee members, university administrators, athletic department administrators, and faculty members. NVivo 10 will be utilized to house and analyze transcriptions of each audio-taped interview. In order to ensure trustworthiness, additional measures, such as peer debriefing, member checking, and intercoder reliability (Guetzkow's U; Cohen's kappa), will be implemented.

Phase two of this study will focus on development of an escalation of commitment scale. Based on the qualitative data, a set of sample items will be generated to describe the aforementioned determinants of escalation. These items will then be audited by independent reviewers familiar with the data and theoretical premise to verify the inclusion of each item on the initial scale. Data will be collected via an online survey to be filled out by university administrators and athletic department decision makers. In order to achieve a reliable factor solution, the targeted sample size is 300 participants (Field, 2009; Worthington, 2006).

The initial version of the scale will include items gleaned from the qualitative phase and previous research conducted by Bouchet and Hutchinson (2010). Respondents will be asked to rate whether they agree or disagree with each item on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We will analyze our scale and instrument by first utilizing exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to understand the factor structure of the scale items (Worthington, 2006). Once completed, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) will be utilized to further explore the relationships between the factors in the scale. Through these methods, the intent is to identify an acceptable scale for identifying and measuring escalation of commitment behavior.

This study represents an important step for understanding and measuring escalation of commitment. This will be the first attempt in the sport management literature to develop a scale for escalation of commitment. Traditionally, studies of escalation of commitment have been constrained to single instrumental case studies and qualitative methodologies. Though fruitful, these studies have lacked predictive and generalizable attributes. The development of such a scale allows researchers the opportunity to address issues of generalizability and predictability, while also providing institutional administrators indications of escalation-based behavior to potentially avoid.