

De-escalation of Commitment among Division I Athletic Departments¹

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“If something cannot go on forever, it will stop.”

-Stein’s Law, named for economist, presidential advisor Herb Stein-

Introduction

Organizations oftentimes commit to projects and courses of action exceeding the boundaries of economic feasibility (Brockner, 1992; Schmidt & Calantone, 2002). The study of management has long been intrigued by the phenomenon in which organizations unwittingly find themselves chasing significant financial profits by expending excessive amounts of resources, eventually unable to recoup invested losses (Ross & Staw, 1993; Staw, 1976). Persistence in such behavior can result in a cycle of continued investment and eventual entrapment in otherwise failing courses of action (Staw, 1981). Although recent data provides evidence of limited profitability among intercollegiate athletic programs (Fulks, 2010), Division I athletic budgets continue to proliferate. Consequently, increasing expenses coupled with deficient revenue generation induces dependence on scarce institutional funds², creating what organizational theorists term permanently failing organizations (Meyer & Zucker, 1989).

In select circumstances, institutional stakeholders would prefer re-allocation of athletic-designated resources to better demonstrate the university’s mission, vision, and core values. Yet, many institutions maintain commitment to Division I athletic participation, predominantly due to perceived brand exposure and institutional status (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010; Washington & Zajac, 2005). This dichotomy has traditionally resulted in recurring institutional subsidization of athletics. Such organizational entrapment in a failing course of action alludes to what many management scholars have labeled escalation of commitment.

Significant empirical research exists regarding escalating commitment in failing projects and losing courses of action. This research places particular attention on the determinants of such

² This paper makes no attempt to distinguish between rational and irrational behavior on the part of institutional decision makers; only to examine increasing commitment of those departments and institutions.

decision making (Brockner, 1992; Staw & Ross, 1987). The vast majority of academic studies investigate escalation from a “why” perspective. In essence, these studies seek to understand and explain why organizations (and individuals) get caught in escalating situations (Montealegre & Keil, 2000). The escalation phenomenon has also been observed within the sport context, providing evidence of application to intercollegiate athletics (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010). Amidst the myriad of studies concerning escalating commitment, limited research has considered procedures for reversing this persistence and avoiding the escalation trap (Montealegre & Keil, 2000).

Commonly referred to as de-escalation of commitment, recent research indicates the complexity of the de-escalation process, noting how project escalation typically extends “far beyond the point where costs outweigh benefits” (Mähring, Keil, Mathiassen, & Pries-Heje, 2008, p. 463). As with escalation, research on de-escalation primarily seeks to explain the phenomenon itself (Montealegre & Keil, 2000). Within the sport setting, research by Bouchet and Hutchinson (2011) examined one institution’s decision to de-escalate in athletic spending via reclassification from Division I to Division III. Although this case study sought to understand the factors for de-escalation in intercollegiate athletics, the process for strategic implementation was not considered. Further, de-escalation was confined to division-based reclassification, neglecting due diligence to alternative forms of redirection. Accordingly, this study seeks to add to the growing body of de-escalation research by understanding the processes associated with de-escalation or redirection of organizational projects.

Although factor-oriented approaches provide initial understanding of subject matter, equally valuable process-oriented approaches lack practical application to the de-escalation phenomenon (Montealegre & Keil, 2000). Process-oriented approaches emphasize the circumstantial sequence of events and activities, seeking to explain the evolution of outcomes

over a period of time (Mohr, 1982; Montealegre & Kiel, 2000). In addition to identifying phases within a given process, Mohr (1982) emphasizes the importance of noting key triggering activities within each phase. Although compiling meaningful data on containing the ‘arms race’ in college athletics provides helpful insight, perhaps more important is identifying strategies for institutions seeking to break the cycle of escalation regarding traditional Division I athletic commitment. The purpose of this study was to investigate de-escalation of commitment strategies in the highly bureaucratic setting of Division I intercollegiate athletics.

This study utilized a collective case study approach in the investigation of de-escalation. The schools selected for this investigation were based on recent decisions to a) reclassify down from Division I, b) remove the football program, and c) restructure the athletic department. Institutions chosen for this study included Centenary College of Louisiana, Birmingham-Southern College, Northeastern University, LaSalle University, East Tennessee State University, University of the Pacific, Long Beach State University, and Vanderbilt University.

The Study

This study was conducted using qualitative methods, with direct interviewing ($N = 33$) being the primary method utilized (See Table 1). This method allowed researchers’ to evaluate interviewee experiences, while also providing them the opportunity to restate relevant events. Due to the nature of Division I athletics and its well-chronicled documentation in the popular press and other public outlets, several additional information sources, such as local and national articles, board of trustee minutes, faculty senate minutes, and institutional budgets, were included in the analysis. These sources were incorporated throughout both data collection and analysis processes as a means for informing the findings and implications sections.

Determination of participants was based on the following two criteria: 1) individuals with decision-making authority regarding the oversight of athletics, and 2) individuals with leadership

roles in the implementation of athletics redirection. Participants encompassed a wide array of institutional roles and included such positions as President, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Provost, Associate V.P., V.P. for Finance, V.P. for Enrollment, V.P. for Administration, V.P. for Public Affairs, Faculty Athletic Representative, Athletic Director, Senior Associate Athletic Director, Associate Athletic Director, and Assistant Athletic Director. Examples of interview questions included “When did the current direction of athletics cease to be a good idea,” “Provide a timeline regarding the process of redirection in the athletic department,” “Was there ever any pressure from internal or external stakeholders to make such a modification,” “What alternatives were considered prior to the redirection of athletics,” “What strategies were implemented to redirect athletics,” and “What other models did you follow prior to the redirection of athletics?” Data were collected via telephone interviews within an office setting, with times ranging from 25 to 70 minutes. Interviews were conducted by two researchers who had been trained by a well-respected qualitative researcher within the education discipline. For purposes of methodological trustworthiness, the techniques of triangulation, audio-taping, transcription, peer debriefing, and member checking were employed.

Findings

Problem Recognition

Progression towards corrective action fails to exist until decision makers acknowledge problem(s) with a given project or course of action. Each of the 33 participants acknowledged several negative institutional-specific factors contributing to initial redirection efforts within their respective institution. Within the scope of current Division I participation, these factors included persistently increasing resource commitment, isolated nature of athletic operations, lack of performance-based competitiveness, complications with conference alignment, incongruency with institutional values, and limited institutional integration of student-athletes. Previous

research concerning the forces of escalation behavior indicates the presence of unambiguously negative feedback (Garland et al., 1990; Montealegre & Keil, 2000) and external organizational pressure (Montealegre & Keil, 2000; Ross & Staw, 1993) as triggering activities in de-escalation progression. Although findings provided evidence of external organizational pressure, limited evidence of unambiguous negative feedback was present.

Lack of Negative Feedback from Stakeholders. Oftentimes, a clear cut case for project redirection is observed by external parties who lack direct involvement. As an example, Ross and Staw's (1993) examination of the extensive financial overruns in construction of the Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant were thoroughly covered by the New York Times. Although several investigations reveal evidence of negative feedback and pressure to modify from several sources, this did not prove to be the case with Division I athletic programs. Quite the contrary, stakeholders, including alumni, students, donors, Board of Trustees, community members, and media members, provided little to no negative feedback or pressure to modify the existing direction of athletics management. Certainly, this was due in part to a lack of stakeholder understanding regarding the true cost of intercollegiate athletics. Concerning the feedback and pressure from stakeholders to remove the sport of football, the opposite was true at University of the Pacific. According to an athletic administrator at Pacific:

The donors wanted to keep it. The community wanted to keep it. Stockton is a blue collar town, very culturally diverse, and football is a working man's sport historically, so there was a great support to try to keep the sport among the external stakeholders, but there was a great pressure and uprising among the faculty to discontinue it...

Faculty members were one of the few stakeholder groups providing negative feedback pertaining to continued commitment with existing Division I participation. However, emergence of faculty displeasure was not consensus and typically followed administrative solicitation pertaining to

money being directed away from academic initiatives. Amidst dire financial circumstances at five of the eight institutions, many stakeholder groups maintained the desire to retain current Division I commitment. Concerning the reclassification of athletics from Division I to Division III, an academic administrator at Centenary stated the following regarding stakeholder feedback:

Not only did they disagree, they're still disagreeing... So there was a very emotional struggle when boosters, stakeholders, alums, trustees were saying that it's absolutely essential that we stay in Division I, that to leave Division I would be a crisis and a disaster; but they're not being willing to donate the money we needed to make it work.

This indicates a deviation from earlier studies of de-escalation in that negative feedback from organizational stakeholders may not surface as in other contexts. In fact, there appears to be more indication of feedback encouraging decision makers to maintain escalation endeavors even amidst the lack of profitability and/or athletic performance. Although negative feedback did not manifest itself in similar fashion to other investigations, external organizational pressure created a significant impact on institutions, particularly those removing the sport of football.

Responding to External Pressures. Amidst increasing pressure from highly committed stakeholders to maintain the level of Division I commitment, select decision makers were faced with environmental forces encouraging redirection. The most prominent external pressure pertained to the continual decrease of state-wide appropriations and budget reductions. This was certainly the case for Pacific, Long Beach, and East Tennessee. 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% reduction in athletic department spending. According to one Long Beach 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 being able to essentially absorb the entire cut." In similar fashion, East

Tennessee faced significant external pressure from state-mandated appropriations, capping and eventually eliminating state funds budgeted for athletics. Coupled with the then ongoing NCAA recertification process and an increased burden of compliance with Title IX standards, responses to external pressures played a significant role in East Tennessee's redirection determination.

Interestingly, those institutions not removing the sport of football, inclusive of Centenary, Birmingham-Southern, and Vanderbilt, did not directly experience external pressure to redirect athletics. In the case of both Centenary and Birmingham-Southern, divisional reclassification was enacted based on a desire to no longer expend scarce institutional resources and a lack of institutional fit with Division I participation. As with institutions removing football, the financial commitment of Division I participation played a significant role in the reclassification at both Centenary and Birmingham-Southern. According to one academic administrator at Centenary:

The cost of the program had escalated steadily and dramatically: steadily for 40 years and dramatically for the last 10 to 15. The quality of the program was simply not measuring up to the quality of programs offered at our conference peers or conference rivals. We could not envision a circumstance in which we would have enough financial resources to improve the quality enough to even match the mean of the conference.

Yet, contrary to noted institutions removing football, external pressures were not a direct factor in the decision to redirect athletics. Both institutions had the opportunity to maintain the status quo with athletics, continuing to supplement with institutional funds and increased fundraising. Most intriguing of all was the structural redirection at Vanderbilt. Of the institutions under investigation, Vanderbilt was the only one to redirect athletics based on factors other than lack of resources. Citing the necessity of a more complete student-athlete experience and solidifying the inclusivity of all institutional departments, none of the six Vanderbilt decision makers noted external organizational pressures (or negative feedback) guiding redirection initiatives.

Re-examination of Prior Course of Action

Although tentative commitment to a course of action may remain in place, decision makers further analyze and seek to understand the gravity of the current situation. In order to determine the necessity of redirection initiatives, decision makers aim to better clarify the magnitude of the problem and, if necessary, redefine the framework of the problem. In previous d-escalation research in other industries, re-examination began with solicitation of outside consultants (Keil & Montealegre, 2000) and the creation of a project-specific task force (Montealegre & Keil, 2000) to further investigate the current state of affairs. Implementation of such methods was intended to provide additional specificity concerning the less visible characteristics of a project or course of action.

Clarifying the Magnitude of the Problem. Select institutions, including Northeastern, La Salle, Long Beach, and Pacific, adhered to traditional approaches of institutional problem resolution by establishment of a task force to further investigate Division I commitment. In each instance, task force constituents comprised a wide array of members from both internal and external stakeholder groups, and consisted of lengthy deliberations with regard to the extent of Division I commitment. However, this method was not utilized by Centenary, Birmingham-Southern, East Tennessee, or Vanderbilt in the definitive decision. Each of these institutions noted the importance of limiting the influence of both internal and external stakeholder groups in decision-making processes. Although redirection had been considered in several earlier instances at Centenary, stakeholder involvement in the conclusive 2011 decision was limited. According to an academic administrator, “There was not a task force per se... It was a fairly closed process; there were not a lot of people consulted.” Although limited, key players played a noteworthy role in eventually creating distinct awareness of the commitment associated with Division I. According to another academic administrator at Centenary:

We formulated a group with the leadership of the Board, a key faculty member or two, and key administrators to try to put in black and white what the cost really was because there was just desperate arguments about how Division I athletics was actually a draw for others and investing in athletics was key to the future of the institution.

Similar measures took shape at Birmingham-Southern as a select few of the president's "kitchen cabinet" [key board members] were consulted in an effort to truly understand the current level of commitment. As with Centenary, Birmingham-Southern uncovered the dire financial scenario of the current level of Division I commitment. For Birmingham-Southern, a \$6.5 million deficit with increasing expenses on the horizon revealed two undesirable options for continued Division I participation: emergency fundraising efforts or extraction from the institution's endowment. With particular relevance to the visibility of project costs, prior research by Brockner, Shaw, and Rubin (1979) indicated a reduced likelihood of continued investment by individuals given the increased exposure to project costs. Montealegre and Keil (2000) further revealed the impact of more clearly understood project costs as a primary driver in better defining and clarifying the magnitude of the problem. Although the salience of Division I costs was not the primary antecedent condition at Vanderbilt, comparable strategies were enacted to better formulate potential structural and philosophical modifications, with even less institutional constituents consulted than Centenary, Birmingham-Southern, and East Tennessee.

Reframing the Problem. Each institution reframed the problem regarding their current commitment to Division I athletics. Said differently, the institutions redefined the problem at hand from "how can we make the existing commitment a success" to "what commitment is in the best interest of the institution." In the case of East Tennessee, substantial financial and physical resources were required to maintain the existing Division I football program. Prior to the decision in 2003, a task force had been established to further investigate avenues for reducing

athletic costs while maintaining a Division I football program. Following three years of unsuccessfully attempts to orchestrate a realistic alternative, decision makers reframed the situational outlook from “how do we make athletics work with football” to “how is the continuation of football affecting athletics.” One academic administrator at East Tennessee noted the following:

When you looked at just the revenue generated through ticket sales, and even gifts and those kind of things, compared to the cost, we were losing a million dollars a year, which was just a lot to bear; and really hurting other sports, of course, because all the times you’re cannibalizing other sports to try to keep football up.

In the cases of Northeastern and La Salle, the primary driver for redirection was not expenditure-based. For Northeastern, current institutional leadership encouraged the mindset of “selective excellence,” charging all departments to consider context-specific modification if success is an unlikely outcome. Feedback from the institutional task force reframed the mindset going forward from “how can we make football more competitive and a better student-athlete experience” to “what areas are hindering athletics from being more competitive and offering a better student-athlete experience.” As evidenced by an academic administrator at Northeastern:

It was really not a targeted discussion that we’re going to have about the removal of football, but it was a broad discussion about let’s take a look at our athletic programs and take a look at their support, their competitiveness, their student-athlete experience, their academic performance... And so it was that kind of broad review and through that review we began to identify football as one of the questions we wanted to raise.

Due to a lack of external pressure to modify the existing athletics model, both Northeastern and La Salle had the financial capability to redistribute funds formerly slotted for football back into the athletic department and the institution. In the case of Vanderbilt, redefining the framework

was the near sole motive for redirection, as neither negative feedback nor external pressures were present. Contrary to other institutions, Vanderbilt's continued participation in Division I was never in question. Yet, the lens through which Division I commitment would be coordinated required a priority-shift for operation. As stated by an academic administrator at Vanderbilt:

In 2003, there was no question that the university was going to continue to remain in Division I and to compete in the SEC and do all those things that they had done for eighty years before... The question was "How do you compete in Division I in a different way?"

Sustained commitment to a given course of action can sometimes be attributed to general lack of understanding concerning not only the magnitude of a problem, but the actual problem itself. Despite, in some instances several, attempts at forcing a derivative of the existing course of action, decision makers were able to step back and reconsider the problem itself. Upon accurate clarification and redefinition, institutional decision makers subsequently considered alternative approaches to the existing formula in place for athletics management.

Searching for Alternative Course of Action

Following additional clarity regarding athletics commitment, decision makers began seeking alternative courses of action. As discussed in the previous phase, established task force members or key designated institutional stakeholders were consulted on producing alternative options. As formerly introduced, differences existed between schools regarding stakeholder involvement in selecting an alternative course of action. Contrary to previous de-escalation findings, certain redirection scenarios called for a less candid approach to stakeholder involvement, incorporating as few individuals as possible in decisions surrounding Division I athletics. Further, impression management among decision makers did not manifest itself in a similar manner as previous de-escalation field studies.

Identifying and Legitimizing a New Course of Action. Each institution put forth extensive effort in identifying and considering alternative courses of action. For instance, several alternatives were considered by institutions enacting divisional reclassification and removing the sport of football. These alternatives included the following: a) Division I non-scholarship football, b) reclassification (to Division II, Division III, or NAIA), c) football program hiatus, and d) reduction of other sport teams. Although several alternatives were identified and considered, the legitimacy of such offerings was usually unrealistic. As noted by an academic administrator at East Tennessee:

We talked about going non-scholarship... we really didn't believe that would help because we had pretty poor [fan] participation... We also talked about kind of putting the program on hiatus for a few years. But the reality was, if you have a program that's fairly weak in many respects, to do that probably would be a pretty hard move to bring it back.

Vanderbilt presented itself with a bit more complex situation as the above noted considerations were not deemed legitimate alternatives in the 2003 decision. The primary difficulty pertained to legitimizing the chosen course of action. The solely identified alternative of restructuring athletics was a foreign concept to the Division I landscape. As such, the process of legitimizing it as the only alternative produced difficulty in conveying implementation. As recalled by an academic administrator:

It was like, I know what we're doing and I know what the results are, but we had a hard time explaining it. I think it's easier for us to explain it now, but we had a hard time explaining it. So I think it would have been good if we would have taken more time to basically lay out the why of it, what it looks like... I think that was a real hindrance.

For all institutions, the act of identifying the most realistic alternative was relatively straightforward, with difficulty emerging in the implementation of the typically undesirable alternative.

A subsequent consequence in former de-escalation studies has been attempts by decision makers to manage individual impressions, 'saving face' in the presence of an unpopular decision.

Reputation of Administrators. Participants from East Tennessee provided the most applicable example of how decision makers simply bore the burden of authorizing such a decision. One of the primary decision makers from East Tennessee noted the decision "had to come from me," specifically informing the Board of Regents since "they would be recipients of letters and flack and things like that." Ownership of the decision resulted in significant negative impressions on decision makers. According to an academic administrator at East Tennessee:

It marred the legacy of our former President, [Name], of all the good he did in 15 years... I think it has caused quite a bit of consternation and distress to [Name], our athletic director, and I think even [Name] was seen as a target basically because... he was seen as the person who actually moved the action forward to the President's attention... So, those three individuals especially have had to forebear a lot of negative PR, a lot of negative media, and they, in many ways, were held personally responsible for it.

Although East Tennessee experienced external pressures, decision makers maintained ownership of the decision, opting not to use environmental factors as a scapegoat. Regardless, as speculated in previous de-escalation research, the convenience of impression management techniques proved challenging as independent third party consultation or involvement was practically non-existent for each institution. Due to the primarily in-house nature of athletics oversight, managing impressions proved to be a near moot point in the de-escalation process.

Implementing an Exit Strategy

The final phase of de-escalation involved the creation, development, and implementation of redirection initiatives. Coupled with appealing to highly committed stakeholders and de-institutionalization of the current level of commitment, the common phrase "easier said than

done” brought about a whole new meaning for decision makers. This phase also comprised the official public release of the conclusive redirection decision, creating additional challenges for decision makers as vested stakeholders’ marshaled final attempts to divert efforts away from the chosen course of action.

Appealing to Stakeholders. One of the greatest obstacles in redirection implementation involved highly committed stakeholder groups. Of note are the institutions electing not to establish a formal task force regarding the definitive decision to redirect Division I commitment. These institutions included Centenary, Birmingham-Southern, East Tennessee, and Vanderbilt. However, this is not to say such an approach was not utilized in the past. For instance, East Tennessee limited consultation of its 2003 decision to remove football due to the numerous complications of a formerly created task force in 1999. Centenary experienced an even greater degree of difficulty with regard to extensive stakeholder consultation, as task forces were established on separate occasions in the 1990’s, early 2000’s, and finally in 2007. Even Vanderbilt revealed task forces created in the 1980’s and continuing throughout the mid-1990’s to consider alternative approaches with athletics. In each instance, appealing to a wide array of internal and external stakeholders only hindered efforts to redirect athletics commitment as the status quo in each circumstance remain unchanged. In light of earlier attempts, a decision maker at Vanderbilt noted the key aspect of the initial step in the 2003 implementation:

The number one strategy is I didn’t tell anyone I was going to do this. I announced it and then asked for forgiveness because if I would have tried to lobby it through, I would have lost it... This was a major effort on my part to change the athletic model of Vanderbilt and I knew that I’d receive a lot of resistance.

Following nearly four years of appealing to both internal and external stakeholders concerning athletics commitment, East Tennessee eventually subscribed to a similar method of enactment,

involving only the most necessary constituents in the 2003 decision-making process:

Basically, myself and the athletic director met with the president of the university. I made the recommendation and the president agreed with it, and then he checked with some key people. We discussed it among the senior staff of the institution... with some higher ed. people in Nashville, some legislative leaders. But, no, we didn't put any kind of task force together because the reality is if you go down that road probably, you're going to have a hard time making a decision and we needed to make a decision.

These examples provide valuable information for further understanding the process of de-escalation. It should be noted that select institutions experienced stakeholder opposition in spite of legitimate and prepared alternatives.

De-institutionalizing the Project. With the high degree of stakeholder commitment to Division I athletics, actual de-institutionalization proved to be the litmus test for institutional redirection. All eight institutions initially de-institutionalized commitment by simply enacting planned redirection modifications. Recent examples of failed attempts to advance Division I de-institutionalization abound, as several institutions have been unsuccessful in redirection efforts (e.g., University of New Orleans, Rice University, Tulane University). In removing the sport of football, both Pacific and East Tennessee considered placing the football program on hiatus, with Pacific suspending football for a tentative period of time. Yet, such efforts were ultimately regarded as providing a false sense of hope, contributing to the increased difficulty in program de-institutionalization. As recalled by an academic administrator at East Tennessee:

You know, maybe we ought to just discontinue football, keep all the equipment, preserve the assets, and when things get better, bring the program back... in the end, we decided if we were going to do away with it, we needed to do away with it completely. We pulled up the Astro turf... we sold all the equipment and when we were finished, we were done.

Within planned redirection efforts, strategic situation-specific maneuvers assisted in solidifying the de-institutionalization process. In a unique set of circumstances, Birmingham-Southern ameliorated Division III reclassification by simultaneously adding the sport of football, which did not exist prior to the 2006 decision. Following their departure from Division I competition, decision makers partially placated stakeholder anguish by including this southern tradition to its athletic offerings. Similar maneuvers were applied at Long Beach as upgraded facilities, including construction of a new basketball arena, were incorporated following removal of the football program. These additions moderated Division I redirection, playing a small role in de-institutionalization. Rather than simply modifying the existing philosophy and maintaining the current structure of athletics, Vanderbilt de-institutionalized by releasing several athletic staff members. Understandably, removing key members of athletic operations is not a desirable task, as recalled by an academic administrator: “It’s a big step to sit your athletics director down and say, ‘We’re going in a different direction and you’re not part of it.’” Such a decision solidified de-institutionalization of the now former athletics model, providing closure on the previous course of action and allowing unimpeded procedure in the new direction.

Implications

Representing the first collective case study on de-escalation, these findings provide several practical implications for the Division I landscape. As discussed previously, past research on de-escalation noted the presence of negative feedback as an important triggering activity in the promotion of de-escalation behavior. Although this remains true in other situations, such an indication may not manifest itself in the context of intercollegiate athletics. As evidenced by each institution, negative feedback was practically non-existent concerning the current Division I commitment, with faculty members providing the sole response. Even with, albeit not consensus, faculty displeasure, negative feedback was typically provided following administrative

establishment of an athletics reform task force. Perhaps faculty displeasure can be attributed to both a better working knowledge of university budgets and possible monetary gains for academic programs. Accordingly, university administrators should expect limited negative feedback from stakeholders as a precursor to de-escalation. More simply, the absence of negative feedback from organizational stakeholders should not be a determinant in redirection initiatives.

As evidenced by Northeastern and La Salle, formation of an institutional task force provided valuable discussion and conclusions concerning redirection initiatives. However, inclusion of such a broad-based stakeholder cohort fails to ensure successful de-escalation progression. Nearly all institutions revealed the establishment of an athletics reform task force in the recent or distant past prior to the definitive redirection decision. Regardless of outcome, several decision makers conveyed the difficulty in implementation due to lengthy institutional deliberation, providing ample time for highly committed stakeholders to marshal forces in opposition of redirection efforts. As such, select institutions elected to forego extensive stakeholder involvement, acknowledging an inability to accomplish de-institutionalization due to the resulting inertia created by highly committed stakeholders.

Unique to de-escalation studies is the emergence of external stakeholder support for continuing the established failing course of action. Within intercollegiate athletics, select external stakeholders (donors, alumni, community members, media members) not only disagreed with the redirection, but put forth every effort to maintain the current commitment to Division I. Perhaps the reluctance of external stakeholders to publically acknowledge financial losses is owed to the very nature of bureaucracies, specifically higher education institutions. This is potentially due to the fact that these external stakeholders rarely pay the full cost of participation in Division I athletics and place an over emphasis on the resulting status of the institution (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010; Washington & Zajac, 2005).

An additional point warranting attention pertains to the incorporation of wide-spread stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes. Recent examples of failed Division I redirection, namely University of New Orleans, Rice University, and Tulane University, have explored and attempted to implement alternative courses of action, all to no avail. Most notably, the University of New Orleans experienced stages of redirection efforts, initially announcing reclassification to Division III in December of 2009, subsequently modifying to Division II in 2011, and, in March of 2012, relinquishing efforts altogether by maintaining the existing Division I status. Limited stakeholder consultation provides a new perspective to triggering activities within the de-escalation model, positing a less candid approach to successful redirection development and implementation.

A final implication involves the absence of decision maker impression management tactics. Although previous de-escalation research provides evidence of decision maker efforts to place blame for redirection initiatives in order to ‘save face,’ such attempts did not appear to emerge among academic or athletic administrators. No empirical evidence exists for explanation of this absence. According to several decision maker responses, ownership of the decision was within the nature of education and athletic administration. Further, the inclusion of managing impressions as a triggering activity within the searching for an alternative course action phase may need to be relocated to the fourth phase of implementing an exit strategy. Consideration of individual impression management did not fully emerge until the more public events surrounding the implementation of an exit strategy. Additionally, strategic maneuvers directing stakeholder attention away from redirection efforts (e.g., Birmingham-Southern adding football, Long Beach constructing new arena) should be considered as serving dual purposes in managing decision maker impressions, as well as ameliorating project de-institutionalization.

Conclusion

As the cost of participation in Division I athletics increases, de-escalation efforts merit consideration as an alternative course of institutional action. Although challenging economic times provide a heightened awareness of the precarious nature of Division I athletics funding, reframing the subsequent solution from cost reduction to commitment reduction is warranted. Regardless of redirection avenue(s), institutional due diligence should consider redefining overall athletics management from “how can we make the existing commitment a success” to “what commitment will make us most successful.” These findings provide empirical evidence for successful and beneficial alternatives in redirecting Division I commitment.

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Table 1

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

Category	Institution	Position	Sex
Reclassification	Centenary College of Louisiana	Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	M
		Athletic Administrator	M
	Birmingham-Southern College	Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	F
		Academic Administrator	M
		Athletic Administrator	M
		Faculty Member	F
	Removal	Northeastern University	Academic Administrator
Athletic Administrator			M
Athletic Administrator			F
La Salle University		Athletic Administrator	M
		Athletic Administrator	M
		Faculty Member	F
East Tennessee State University		Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	F
		Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	M
		Athletic Administrator	M
University of the Pacific		Athletic Administrator	M
		Athletic Administrator	F
		Athletic Administrator	M
Long Beach State University		Academic Administrator	M
	Academic Administrator	M	
	Athletic Administrator	M	
	Athletic Administrator	M	
Restructure	Vanderbilt University	Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	F
		Academic Administrator	M
		Academic Administrator	F