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Abstract

Escalation of commitment has been studied extensively within management and has been found to be particularly prevalent within intercollegiate athletics. The purpose of this study was to broaden the scope of traditional escalation of commitment research by developing effective means for locating sport organizations within Staw and Ross's (1987) temporal model. In doing so, we moved beyond the typical qualitative case study approach and sought to provide more generalized findings, both within the context of intercollegiate athletics and within the broader sport industry. Through identifying relevant factors within our data and combining those with other descriptive variables, we were able to provide general institutional profiles for universities in each of the four phases of escalation. The implications of this research for intercollegiate athletics programs and the broader sport industry are discussed.

Keywords: *escalation of commitment, intercollegiate athletics, athletic administration*

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Across many disciplines and industries, various organizations have demonstrated commitment to the expansion of their current operations in order to increase their viability and profitability within various fields. For some, the expansion of their operations may indeed result in these intended objectives. For others, this increased commitment often means nothing more than a substantial increase in expenditures without significant returns in viability or profitability. In the latter of these scenarios, this can be particularly problematic when organizations or individuals resist altering or even abandoning the increased commitment. Scholars have studied these types of situations to better understand why certain entities have remained committed to endeavors that continually provide negative feedback and deleterious consequences (e.g., Sleesman, Conlon, McNamara, & Miles, 2012).

Similar to those in other industries, sport organizations have also found themselves escalating levels of commitment to courses of action that are meant to bolster profitability and viability within their respective segments (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010; Hutchinson & Bouchet, 2014a). Perhaps the best example of this can be found in intercollegiate athletics where universities have made substantial investments into increasing the viability of their athletic programs for purposes of enhancing their stature among their peer universities (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010). That is, numerous universities have committed to divisional realignments (i.e., moving from NCAA Division II to NCAA Division I), athletic facilities' construction and renovations, increasing coaching salaries, and even adding sports in order to pursue greater viability and stature. However, financial data has suggested that most athletic departments are forced to draw from universities' general funds in order to sustain operations, as expenditures have steadily outpaced generated revenues (Fulks, 2013). Despite this negative financial feedback, many universities have remained steadfast in escalating commitment to competing in high-level athletics.

Staw and Ross (1987) produced a temporal model depicting the impact of commitment determinants within distinct phases of escalation. Those in the lowest phases of escalation may simply be contemplating expensive endeavors or perhaps have started to receive questionable evidence regarding a project's return on investment. Those in the highest phases of escalation likely have substantial evidence of a project's failure to meet desired objectives but face formidable hurdles to withdrawal from the project (e.g., political forces or stakeholders both inside or outside of the organization). From this initial conception, scholars have employed this model to illustrate the progression of organizational escalation within certain cases (e.g., Drummond, 1994; Mähring & Keil, 2008; Ross & Staw, 1993). However, scholars have yet to provide an effective means for locating organizations within the various phases of escalation. Most research into escalation of commitment tends to be retrospective and qualitative in nature, providing limited utility for those who may be currently escalating. Thus, it is important to examine

effective means for identifying where organizations may be situated within the escalation continuum.

Considering these limitations, the purpose of this research was to broaden the scope of traditional escalation studies by developing an effective means for identifying the extent to which organizations within a specific field (e.g., college athletics) may be located within Staw and Ross's (1987) four phases of escalation. This is especially important within college athletics as most universities continually lose money pursuing ever-expanding athletic endeavors (Fulks, 2013). Thus, this study provides a starting point for universities to identify the degree to which they may be escalating their commitment to athletics. Although this study is fairly contextually specific, it likely provides a useful approach for identifying which particular phase of escalation within which other sport organizations may be located. The utility and implications of this study will be discussed expressly.

Escalation of Commitment Conceptual Framework

Escalation of commitment denotes those situations wherein individuals or organizations remain devoted to projects or courses of action despite feedback indicating the projects or actions are failing to meet their presupposed objectives (Ross & Staw, 1993; Sleesman et al., 2012; Staw, 1976; Staw & Ross, 1987). Although the specific details often vary based on context, escalation situations generally display similar characteristics (Brockner, 1992). That is, decision makers commit substantial resources to a project with hopes that the project will ultimately result in a profitable situation for the sponsoring organization. During implementation, decision makers begin to receive feedback suggesting the project may not result in the desired objectives. At this point, decision makers continue allocating resources to the project or, in extreme cases, substantially increase the resource allotment in hopes that the project will then meet expectations of success. Ultimately, this could affect the long-term viability of these firms (see Montealegre & Keil, 2000; Ross & Staw, 1993).

Determinants of Escalation

Research has suggested numerous factors as to why organizations may become trapped in escalation situations. Traditionally, scholars have suggested four determinants—project, psychological, social, and structural—that factor into escalation of commitment (Staw & Ross, 1987). Research regarding project determinants has investigated the impact of financial or economic consequences (e.g., closing costs, opportunity costs, salvage value) in continuing an existing commitment (see Brockner, Rubin, & Lang, 1981; McCain, 1986; Moon & Conlon, 2002; Northcraft & Wolf, 1984; Staw & Fox, 1977). While decision makers are influenced by the feasibility of available alternatives and their subsequent impact, research has identified the resulting decision to be based on the avenue producing the highest expected utility (Sleesman et al., 2012). In the context of intercollegiate

athletics, facilities (notably Division I FBS football stadiums) are one example of a project determinant, as de-escalation would produce limited alternative uses (salvage value) and expensive closing costs.

Considered the most studied variable, psychological determinants focus on the role of information processing among decision makers, accounting for the emergence of individual motivations (e.g., self-justification), biases (e.g., data misrepresentation), and errors (e.g., efforts to retrieve sunk costs) (see Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Bragger, Hantula, Bragger, Kirnan, & Kutcher, 2003; Keil, Depledge, & Rai, 2007; Wong & Kwong, 2007; Zhang & Baumeister, 2006). Former research on psychological determinants has further identified the role of reinforcements traps (or difficulty withdrawing from a formerly rewarded behavior) encouraging decision maker continuation in escalating scenarios (Platt, 1973; Ross & Staw, 1993). Regarding intercollegiate athletic operations, psychological determinants may manifest in the form of university administrators misrepresenting the financial return of athletics participation in order to justify a previous resource investment (e.g., new or upgraded facility) in athletics.

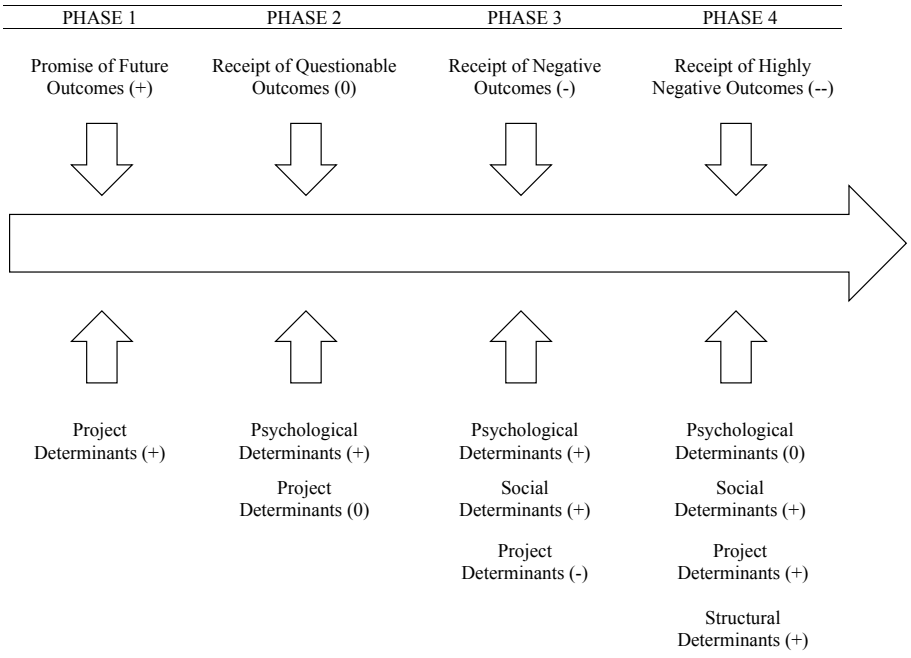
Oftentimes considered a consequence of psychological determinants, social determinants account for the role of both internal and external parties. Such social influencers serve as observers, commentators, evaluators, and opponents regarding the existing commitment to a project or course of action. Research has identified several decision maker behaviors resulting from the pressure and expectations put forth by these parties, including behavior modeling, societal leadership norms, and impression management (see Brockner, Rubin, & Lang, 1981; Brockner et al., 1984; Fox & Staw, 1979; Staw & Ross, 1980). Due to the extensive involvement of various stakeholder groups (notably athletic department donors), social determinants often impact the behavior of university administrators, as most desire to maintain a positive personal impression (or "face") with respect to popular university programs or initiatives.

Finally, structural determinants account for "the structural features of an organization and its interaction patterns" (Staw & Ross, 1987, p. 60). Contrary to the former three determinants, this determinant consists of both organizational elements (e.g., other organizational decisions supporting the original course of action) and contextual features (e.g., side bets), particularly noting the influence of nonindividual-level factors. While research investigating structural determinants is minimal at best (see Sleesman et al., 2012), scholars posit the involvement of organizational side bets (or additional investments that make the original course of action sustainable), political support, and project institutionalization as encouraging escalation behavior (see Goodman, Bazerman, & Conlon, 1980; March, 1978; Pfeffer, 1981). For example, structural determinants are present at most Division I universities in the form of financial/economic side bets (e.g., donor dollars, student fees, university funds), technical side bets (e.g., geography), and political side bets (e.g., municipal involvement); simply, maintaining or increasing commitment

to athletics is dependent upon one or more of these sources. Ultimately, Ross and Staw (1993) separated structural determinants into organizational determinants and contextual determinants to delineate the influence of external and internal structures that may affect escalation.

Phases of Escalation

In accordance with the described determinants, scholars have proposed that escalation of commitment is not necessarily a one-time event but a continuation of decisions that occur in phases (Brockner, 1992; Drummond, 1994; Ross & Staw, 1993; Staw & Ross, 1987, 1989). In assessing the landscape of escalation research, Staw and Ross (1987) developed a temporal model proposing four phases of escalation (see Figure 1). Each phase demonstrates distinct characteristics of resistance produced by the determinants in organizational withdrawal efforts. Phase one, *Promise of Future Outcomes*, is the lowest phase of escalation wherein organizations begin to commit resources to pursuing a course of action that will likely provide future profits or organizational successes. At this stage, organizations and decision-makers likely experience limited resistance if withdrawal from the project is deemed necessary. This phase is characterized by the presence of project determinants. Phase two, *Receipt of Questionable Outcomes*, is likely where organizations begin to receive some negative feedback concerning their decision



[a]Adopted from Staw and Ross (1987), Mähring and Keil (2008).
[b]The +s, -s, and 0s in the figure depict the influence of different types of escalation factors during various points of time

Figure 1. Temporal Model of Escalation[ab]

to pursue a course of action. Withdrawal is still feasible but with the introduction of psychological determinants, stakeholders and managers likely begin to become more committed to continuing the projects.

The third phase, *Receipt of Negative Outcomes*, is where higher levels of commitment are noticed, as well as a subsequent increase in resistance to withdrawal from projects or courses of action. Despite evidence that the project may be failing, managers and stakeholders are likely committed to seeing the project through in hopes that it will become profitable. This phase also takes into account the perceptions from peer organizations (i.e., social determinants). The fourth phase of escalation, *Receipt of Highly Negative Outcomes*, is where organizations are at the greatest point of escalation. Commitment levels are high, and withdrawal is extremely difficult due to substantial consequences produced by the impact of all four determinants, thus resulting in the organization on the precipice of failure. Considering this, it is important for organizations to have means for locating themselves within these phases of escalation of commitment.

Despite extensive research of escalation within a variety of organizational contexts, scholars have struggled to develop means for objectively locating organizations within the various phases of escalation. To date, conceptualizing escalation of commitment remains fairly abstract and subjective based primarily on the observations of outside sources (e.g., researchers). This has limited the utility of this theory within organizations as scholars have yet to provide quantified evidence of escalating commitment. Thus, the purpose of this research is to move toward developing effective means for identifying the extent to which organizations, specifically universities and their athletic departments, may be located within the four phases of escalation. Although the focus of this research is escalation within college athletics, this study may provide insight into effective methods for other sport organizations for understanding the degree to which they may be escalating.

Method

In order to begin measuring escalation of commitment within intercollegiate athletics, we implemented a multistage process that first included developing valid and reliable scales for measuring the determinants of escalation of commitment. These scales were then implemented in subsequent measures that included various other categorical variables.

Instrument Development

The first step in measuring escalation of commitment was to develop valid and reliable scales for the determinants of escalation. As previously discussed, few have attempted to develop scaled measurements of escalation; thus, our initial task was to generate questionnaire items. To begin, we drew from previous research on escalation of commitment within intercollegiate athletics' contexts to formulate items (see Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010, 2011, 2012; Hutchinson, 2013; Hutchin-

son & Bouchet, 2014a, 2014b). We then conducted interviews with key academic and athletic administrators at various universities that were deemed to be escalating their commitment to intercollegiate athletics.

Institutions selected for participation increased their commitment to athletics over the past 10 years (2003–2012) in one of three capacities: (a) reclassification to Division I, (b) reclassification from Division I FCS to Division I FBS, and (c) adding a Division I football program[1]. A total of six institutions were selected, with two participants (n = 12) from each institution interviewed. Participants were selected based on the extent of their decision-making authority or leadership involvement in the redirection, and comprised such positions as President, Vice President, Faculty Athletics Representative, Athletic Director, Senior Associate Athletic Director, and Associate Athletic Director. Data were collected via phone interviews in an office setting, each of which lasted no longer that 30 minutes. Trustworthiness was fulfilled through the application of triangulation, audio-taping, verbatim transcription, member checking, and peer debriefing. Analysis of collected data was conducted using QSR International's NVivo 10 software throughout a three-step coding process by two coders. In order to ensure reliability, two measures of inter-coder reliability were administered (Guetzkow U = 0.08; κ= 0.08), both of which indicated a high degree of agreement between coders. The coded data were instrumental in the development of our survey as they provided insight into many of the questions included on the final questionnaire.

The initial questionnaire contained 52 items across five determinants of escalation of commitment[2] (project: n = 18; psychological: n = 7; social: n = 9; organizational: n = 6; contextual: n = 12). The questionnaire was then submitted to a panel of four external expert reviewers, including athletic directors, university financial officers, and university faculty, who assessed the content validity of the questions as they related to the provided definitions of the determinants. Based on recommendations from the external reviewers and further conceptualizations of the constructs, the final questionnaire was modified to 39 items (project: n = 5; psychological: n = 7; social: n = 9; organizational: n = 6; contextual: n = 12). Each of the items (excluding the project determinants) was measured using 5-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Further, the project determinants were modified from scaled variables into categorical variables. In light of responses we received from our expert panel and previous conceptualizations of project determinants (see Ross & Staw, 1993; Sleesman et al., 2012; Staw & Ross, 1987), this seemed to better suit these items. For example, "Our university's athletic department is subsidized by the university's central funds" was deemed better suited as a binary variable (e.g. yes or no) than as a scaled item. Other proj-

[1]According to Fulks (2013), football is consistently the most expensive sport for universities to sponsor.

[2]Early conceptualizations of escalation of commitment only suggested four determinants; project, psychological, social, and structural (see Staw & Ross, 1987). Subsequently, Ross and Staw (1993) suggest five determinants with the previous conceptualized structural determinants being divided into organizational and contextual determinants.

ect determinant items included information concerning media and bowl payouts to the university (labeled "Media Revenue" and "Bowl Payouts") along with one determinant referring to the renovation of existing or construction of new athletic facilities (labeled "Facility Construction").

Lastly, descriptive items were included on the survey instrument and were used to provide further insight into the institutional profiles of universities in the various phases of escalation. These items included information concerning the athletic budget (codes: 1= budgets < $10 million, 2 = budgets $10 million–$24,999,999, 3 = budgets $25 million–$59,999,999 million, 4 = budgets > $60 million), NCAA division affiliation (1 = FBS, 2 = FCS, 3 = Division I no football), enrollment (1 = <10,000, 2 = 10,000–19,999, 3 = 20,000–29,999, 4 = 30,000 –39,999, 5 = > 40,000), state funding structure (0 = public, 1 = private). Finally, we included questions concerning the presence of football on campus (0 = no, 1 = yes). These items, along with the scaled items and project determinants were included in our final analysis that provided insight into how universities were ultimately situated within the four phases of escalation.

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited from a target population that included all NCAA Division I affiliated universities. Targeted participants included athletic directors, senior athletic administrators, faculty athletic representatives, university presidents, university chancellors, university financial officers, and directors of enrollment.[3] The final number of participants was 402 with 181 indicating they were Senior University Administrators, 201 indicating they were Senior Athletic Administrators, and 20 individuals declining to offer their positions. These participants were reasonably distributed across the various divisions of NCAA Division I athletics as well (Division I FBS: n = 174; Division I FCS: n = 110; Division I no football: n = 107; no indication of level: n = 11). Upon receiving IRB approval, the final version of our questionnaire was distributed to participants via an internet-based survey. Considering the limited precedent, data for this study were analyzed in multiple stages.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were analyzed using SPSS statistical software with AMOS 18. Initially, we conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation on the first 200 in order to analyze the factor structure of our escalation of commitment items. Items with factor loadings greater than .5 along with factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were retained with models explaining at least 60% of the variance being deemed acceptable (see Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Cronbach's alpha coefficients were conducted on the final factors to test for reliability with values greater than .7 indicating a reliable

[3]The titles of these individuals varied from one university to the next.

measure. Based upon this analysis, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 18 on the subsequent round of responses (n=204) in order to analyze the fit of our measurement scales. In doing so, we referred to the Chi-square per degree of freedom index (the comparative fit indices (CFI), incremental fit indices (IFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). According to Carmines and McIver (1981), values ranging from 2–3 equate to an acceptable fitting model. CFI and IFI values > .9 and RMSEA values <.8 suggest a good fitting model (Hair et al., 2006). Each of these was taken into account when determining the goodness of fit with the measurement scales in our study.

Lastly, the data responses were combined and the factors were included along with the project determinants and other independent variables into a *k-means* cluster analysis. Other items included in the cluster analysis included conference categorization (Football Bowl Subdivision, Football Championship Subdivision, and No Football), university enrollment, university funding structure (private or state supported), and athletic department budget. From this analysis, we were able to provide profiles for the various stages of escalation of commitment within intercollegiate athletics.

Results

Component Analysis

Our original questionnaire contained 39 scaled items. The initial PCA included all of these items resulting in nine components with numerous cross loadings, low communalities, and low factor loadings. These items were reduced using the previously described methods to 16 items with the final component structure consisting of five factors that explained 72.396% of the variance. The detailed results, including each factor's eigenvalue, variance explained, Cronbach's alpha, mean and standard deviation, are presented in Table 1. Each factor included items that point to various forces that likely result in escalation of commitment within intercollegiate athletics. Each factor was assigned a label that was indicative of its comprising items.

The first factor was labeled *Economy* as the included items were those that concerned the degree to which the national and local economy influenced decisions within the respondents' athletic departments. The second factor was labeled *Government* and included items concerning the extent to which decision makers in athletics accounted for government or political forces. The third factor, termed *University Mission*, consisted of items that examined perceptions of athletics' alignment with the respondents' university missions. The fourth factor, *University Status*, included items concerning the perception of athletics' contribution to each university's influence and relevance on both regional and national levels. The final factor was labeled *External Pressures for Football*. This included items that addressed forces outside of the athletic department (i.e., university administration,

Table 1

Summary of Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

Rotated Factor Loadings					
Item	Ext. Pressures	Economy	Government	Mission	Status
1	.87				
2	.78				
3	.76				
4	.70				
5		.89			
6		.86			
7		.85			
8			.88		
9			.86		
10			.77		
11				.84	
12				.80	
13				.78	
14					.88
15					.80
16					.72
Mean (SD)	*3.27 (1.07)*	*2.93(.97)*	*2.43(.89)*	*4.32 (.56)*	*4.21(.63)*
Eigenvalues	3.70	3.02	2.28	1.38	1.20
% of Variance	23.13	18.90	14.24	8.64	7.50
α	.79	.86	.83	.78	.79

alumni, regional culture, and the landscape of intercollegiate athletics) that factored into universities' commitment to maintaining football on campus. Generally, each of these factors was consistent within the previously observed theoretical constructs of escalation of commitment with most of the extracted factors being grouped within their originally designated escalation determinant. However, it should be noted that one factor, *External Pressures for Football*, consisted of items from multiple determinants. This was not necessarily unexpected as the determinants of escalation are very much interrelated.

Upon extracting these factors, we analyzed the overall fit of the extracted model through CFA with the remaining respondent data (n = 204). The fit indices of our factor model demonstrated an acceptable fit on three of the four fit indices (χ^2/df=2.497, CFI = .902, IFI = .904). Each portion of the model (i.e. the model as a whole and the comprising individual scales) demonstrated acceptable fit values on at least two fit indices (each individual scale exhibited CFI and IFI values > .9). Given the wide variety of universities from which participants completed questionnaires and the lack of precedent within the escalation of commitment literature of scale development, we were satisfied with the overall model fit and proceeded with including these measures in the subsequent analyses.

Phases of Escalation

To classify our data within the four phases of escalation of commitment (see Staw & Ross, 1987), we recombined the data and conducted a *k-means* cluster analysis wherein we designated four clusters for data groupings, representing each phase of escalation. Initially, the variables included in this analysis were the five extracted scales (*External Pressures for Football, Economy, Government, University Mission,* and *University Status*), the four project determinant variables, and three descriptive variables (see Appendix A for scale items). *University Mission* was ultimately excluded from the final cluster analysis, as it was not significantly different (p = .618) across the clusters. The means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations are included in Table 2. Table 3 illustrates the manner in which the data clustered.

The first cluster, termed *Low Escalation*, included the lowest number of respondents (n=79). This cluster consisted of large public universities with large athletic budgets that did not receive university subsidies and received at least $1 million per year in media revenues and bowl payouts. The second cluster, labeled *Moderate Escalation*, was comprised of 108 respondents. Universities included in this cluster were generally private universities with small athletic budgets that did not compete in Division I football. These universities did require university subsidies and did not receive substantial media revenues. The third cluster, termed *High Escalation*, included the largest number of respondents (n = 131). These universities had moderately low enrollments and smaller athletic budgets. They competed at the FCS level of Division I football yet still did not receive significant

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Economy	---											
2. Government	.43**	---										
3. University Status	.11*	.16**	---									
4. External Pressures	.13**	.32**	.20**	---								
5. Sponsor Football	.04	.13**	.06	.85**	---							
6. University Subsidies	.13**	-.13*	-.07	-.28**	-.18**	---						
7. Media Revenue	-.09	.14**	.17**	.46**	.39**	-.43**	---					
8. Bowl Payout	-.12*	.12*	.14**	.45**	.16**	-.48**	.81**	---				
9. Private/Public	-.11*	-.47**	-.04	-.37**	-.27**	.33**	-.16**	-.20**	---			
10. Enrollment	-.02	.35**	.13*	.37**	.27**	-.42**	.52**	.51**	-.53**	---		
11. AD Budget	-.11	.17**	.12*	.50**	.48**	-.46**	.78**	.69**	-.15**	.58**	---	
12. Division	-.02	-.26**	-.12*	-.80**	-.79**	.34**	-.63**	-.58**	.35**	-.49**	-.68**	---
M	2.98	2.47	4.22	3.29	---	---	---	---	---	2.39	2.42	1.83
SD	.95	.96	.63	1.12	---	---	---	---	---	1.30	1.05	.83

Table 3

Participant Groupings

Cluster	Low Escalation		Moderate Escalation		High Escalation		Very High Escalation	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Economy	2.24	.76	2.91	.83	2.98	.92	3.80	.65
Government	2.45	.75	2.21	.90	2.08	.86	3.46	.65
University Status	4.30	.65	4.15	.62	4.13	.61	4.35	.62
External Pressures	4.01	.63	1.75	.48	3.61	.57	4.11	.64
Sponsor Football	Yes	--	No	--	Yes	--	Yes	--
University Subsidies	Yes	--	Yes	--	Yes	--	Yes	--
Media Revenues	Yes	--	No	--	No	--	Yes	--
Bowl Payout	Yes	--	No	--	No	--	No	--
Public/Private	Public	--	Private	--	Public	--	Public	--
Enrollment	3.84	.98	1.76	.99	1.50	.59	3.22	1.04
AD Budget	3.73	.49	1.51	.53	1.90	.68	3.03	.75
Division	1.03	.16	2.94	.27	1.82	.48	1.17	.41

media revenues or bowl monies. The fourth cluster, termed *Very High Escalation*, included 84 respondents. These universities were fairly large public universities that competed at the FBS level of football yet did not receive substantial bowl payouts. This cluster also scored highest on scales depicting external forces influencing athletic decisions suggesting that withdrawal would be extremely difficult. As such, the greatest number of cases in our data were deemed to be in either *Moderate Escalation* or *High Escalation.*

Discussion of Results

The purpose of this study was to provide an effective means for locating universities and their athletic departments within the various phases of escalation of commitment. In doing so, we clustered scaled measures of specific psychological, social, organizational, and contextual determinants along with specific categorical project determinants and other descriptive variables in order to provide specific profiles of universities within each phase of escalation. The significance of this research, both within the context of intercollegiate athletics and within the broader field of sport management, is discussed in subsequent sections.

Phases of Escalation within Intercollegiate Athletics

In alignment with previous research that has suggested four phases of escalation of commitment (see Staw & Ross, 1987), through clustering techniques, we provided descriptive general profiles of universities within each phase of escalation of commitment to athletics. Although many of the factors contributing to escalation behavior may be organizationally specific, we were able to narrow these factors to four scaled and eight categorical variables within the context of NCAA Division I athletics. Despite well argued rationalizations for universities' escalating commitment to athletics (see Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010; Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008), understanding the phase of escalation provides valuable information as the consequences for continuing within failing courses of action can be quite significant (Hutchinson & Bouchet, 2014a). Thus, consider the following profiles of universities within each phase of escalation.

Our research suggests that the fewest cases were found in the first phase of escalation ("promise of future outcomes"). These cases were those from FBS affiliated universities with large university enrollments and that had allocated the largest athletic budgets. These were also the cases that had received substantial television revenues and bowl game payouts, while not receiving university subsidies to fund their athletic operations. Taking into account that previous studies that have suggested that universities tend to invest in their athletic programs as a platform for marketing and brand exposure (see Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010; Goff, 2000; Putler & Wolfe, 1999; Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008), we maintain that these cases are still in phase one of escalation because they have seemingly realized these benefits from athletics in the form of substantial television revenue and

exposure, along with substantial bowl monies. Further, it is not surprising that this phase contained the fewest number of cases as recent financial data has suggested that only 23 of 340 NCAA Division I athletic departments were self-sustaining (Fulks, 2013).

The second phase of escalation, "receipt of questionable outcomes," is represented by those cases from smaller, private universities that do not sponsor football. These universities tend to have smaller athletic budgets, yet their athletic departments are still subsidized by the universities' general funds. Interestingly, respondents from these universities still suggested that athletics enhances their university's status and reputation among their peers and within their regions despite the fact that they generally received limited television exposure (as indicated by the small television revenues). Although these universities may not be generating the larger revenues of those that do sponsor football, they are still deemed in the second phase of escalation because they have refrained from adding the largest budgetary expense (i.e., football, see Fulks, 2012). In these cases, athletics may not be the most lucrative investment of resources; yet the level of exposure associated with athletics, however small it may be, may still provide justification for funding athletics sans football.

The last two phases of escalation may be the most troublesome considering the increase in negative outcomes and the increased difficulty of withdrawal from the course of action (Staw & Ross, 1987). The third phase of escalation in this study consisted primarily of universities competing at the FCS level of NCAA Division I athletics. The respondents in this phase denoted moderately high levels of football commitment within their universities, yet they still maintained relatively small athletic budgets when compared to their FBS counterparts. Predictably, these universities do not receive football bowl game money and they reported limited television revenues. Our data further indicates that these universities are reliant on university subsidies to bolster their athletic operations. The fact that our data indicates higher levels of escalation within the FCS division is substantiated by the most recent financial report provided by the NCAA. This report suggested that these athletic departments are receiving increasingly greater subsidies from their universities to cover their financial shortfalls (Brown, 2013; Fulks, 2013). Despite the increased university subsidies and the lack of substantial external revenues, the cases were still considered to be at a slightly lower level of escalation because they indicated that external forces (e.g., government influence) were not overly important in their decision-making. Although they are still in one of the higher phases of escalation, the lack of significant external forces (i.e., structural determinants) would suggest that withdrawal may be less difficult than those in the highest stage of escalation (Drummond, 1994; Staw & Ross, 1987).

In the context of this study, FBS universities that have large athletic budgets, fairly large university enrollments, and are highly committed to football represent the fourth and highest phase of escalation. Superficially, these universities do not

appear to be particularly dissimilar from those universities in the lowest stage of escalation, yet there are significant differences between these types of universities. Despite their large athletic budgets and commitment to football, these athletic departments do not receive substantial payouts from football bowl games and their operations must be subsidized by their universities' general funds. Further, respondents from this phase indicated that their operations are influenced by externalities such as politics and the economy more so than those in the other phases. Although these universities still receive substantial television revenues, we would still consider these to be in the highest phase of escalation considering the presence of these structural determinants, which are indicative of the fourth phase of escalation of commitment (Staw & Ross, 1987). It is also likely that these universities would face greater resistance if they ever decided to withdraw from their attempts to compete at the highest level of intercollegiate athletics.

Although the cluster membership profiles for each phase of escalation are relatively broad and may not fully represent all universities within each category (e.g., private universities sponsoring football), this research offers general profiles of athletic departments that are likely found within each phase of escalation. Among the possible factors of escalation within athletic departments, our data suggests that key indicators of escalation of commitment center on universities' commitment to football and the returns they may be receiving from this dedication. Further, our analysis allows universities to understand the level of outside influence in their decision-making relative to the measures included within each of the phases. We acknowledge the difficulty in generalizing all of the factors that may contribute to universities falling into escalation of commitment situations in regards to athletics; however, this research provides an important starting point for universities that may seek to evaluate their commitment to athletics.

Finally, we acknowledge that escalation of commitment is a dynamic process wherein universities may fluctuate their levels of commitment, thereby changing the phase in which they may be located. For instance, universities that increase their commitment to football and substantially increase their athletic budgets yet do not reap the rewards of increased television or bowl revenues would likely move into higher phases of escalation. Conversely, universities that lower their athletic budgets and retreat from pursuing expensive athletic endeavors may move into the lower phases. Thus, it is important to understand there is a certain level of mobility between the phases of escalation.

Measuring Escalation in Sport Organizations

Although many of the elements of this study may be contextually specific, this research provides insight into effective methods for sport organizations to locate themselves within the four phases of escalation of commitment. Regardless of the context, it remains paramount for sport organizations that are likely within escalation type scenarios to recognize the determinants or variables that may be con-

tributing to their escalation behaviors. Indeed, there are myriad factors that may contribute to this type of behavior when considering diverse organizations within diverse fields. However, our present study suggests certain shared factors that may prove useful for sport organizations across a variety of contexts to ascertain their level of escalating commitment in certain courses of action.

In particular, our research provides evidence that managers' responses on certain scaled variables, when coupled with information concerning spending habits within the organization and return on project investments, can provide a generalized indication as to the organization's likely location within the phases of escalation of commitment. As such, the presented scale items may be modified to include contextually relevant factors that may be contributing to escalation behavior. For instance, our scale concerning devotion to high-profile projects may include other projects or endeavors within an organization. The focus of our scale was external forces driving commitment to football, as previous escalation research within intercollegiate athletics has suggested that remaining highly committed to football, despite the cost or success of the football program, may be an indication of escalation of commitment (Hutchinson & Bouchet, 2014a). Certainly, other sport organizations could include high-profile projects or endeavors within this scale to provide a meaningful measure of commitment among the organizations' stakeholders. The other presented scales in this study may be modified accordingly.

Further, it is important to identify project determinants and other outcome variables that would point to the success or failure of projects within sport organizations. We included items concerning athletic department budget size, university subsidies of their athletic departments' budgets, athletic facility construction, along with the television and bowl monies as key variables in locating universities within the various phases of escalation. Sport organizations that may be located in other contexts should identify similar variables when attempting to measure their levels of escalation of commitment. We would suggest that it is important for organizations to understand what success from an endeavor would entail when identifying these variables. For many universities, they remain devoted to athletics, particularly football, because of the hopes of achieving substantial television dollars while enhancing the status of their universities (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010). By understanding what it may mean for a sport organization to be successful, managers can then better understand if they are receiving their expected returns on their investments or if they are simply pursuing a losing endeavor.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the significant findings of this research, we recognize certain limitations within this study. Notably, this study was a cross-sectional investigation into a dynamic phenomenon. Considering that escalation of commitment takes place over a significant period of time with multiple factors and influences involved,

future studies should consider a more longitudinal approach to account for these variables. Also, the number of variables and scale items in this study were fairly small. We would have preferred more of our original items to load when we conducted our component analysis. We would have also preferred to have more variables concerning the specific financial aspects of operating athletic departments. However, we noticed that many of our variables had missing values. This caused us to exclude these variables, including university budgets, university endowments, and specific university contributions to athletics. We also were unable to specify the amount of donations received by the universities because of their commitment to athletics. Although this information would have enriched the findings of our study, we still contend that the information we were able to gather provided an accurate depiction of universities' levels of commitment to athletics and the benefits they may be receiving from athletics. In regard to the missing data points, we had included multiple high-level academic and athletic administrators within the population sampled. Considering the nature of the variables with many missing data points, we would contend that the actual number of people on any given campus that may understand the actual finances or rationales behind commitment to athletics, and particularly football, may be fairly limited. Thus, many of the respondents may have actually been ignorant to the innerworkings of athletics.

This study provided a unique and initial insight into broadly measuring the phases of escalation of commitment upon which future studies may build. Particularly, future research into escalation of commitment within intercollegiate athletics should seek to include more variables concerning the financial aspects of sponsoring athletics on campus. This, coupled with further exploration and expansion of scaled items, would provide a more complete perspective of the various phases of escalation within this context. Future studies should also seek to employ the techniques of this study with sport organizations operating in other contexts. Although this study was conducted within the model of intercollegiate athletics, other sport organizations engaging in high-cost, high-visibility endeavors may also exhibit escalation tendencies. One pertinent example is construction of the $60 million high school football stadium in Allen, Texas, that has experienced significant setbacks (see Mandell, 2013). Considering most research into escalation scenarios tends to be context specific, it is important to discover measures and variables that are transdisciplinary in order to better identify and understand how organizations and individuals become ensconced in escalation situations. Finally, although our factor model did exhibit acceptable values on many fit indices, future research should seek to further refine scaled measurements of escalation of commitment so that the fit indices are substantially strengthened. However, this initial attempt was an important step as it provides unique means for locating sport organizations within the various phases of escalation of commitment.

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Appendix A

Final Scale Items

Factor and Item	*M*	*SD*
External Pressures		
1. The administration at my university is committed to supporting and maintaining the football program at my university.	3.40	1.64
2. Our alumni favor our university competing in Division I football (FCS or FBS).	3.91	1.25
3. The current landscape of college athletics has influenced our decision to compete in FBS college football.	2.48	1.37
4. The culture of the surrounding region influences the university's decision to sponsor a Division I football program.	3.51	1.15
Economy		
5. The current state of the economy influences our university's commitment to Division I college athletics.	3.17	1.05
6. The current state of the economy influences our university's athletic conference affiliation.	2.90	1.11
7. The current state of the economy influences our university's commitment to Division I college football.	2.88	1.09
Government		
8. Our commitment to Division I college athletics is influenced by our state government.	2.64	1.17
9. Our state government influences our athletic conference affiliation.	2.24	1.05
10. The local government in our community influences our university's commitment to Division I college athletics.	2.54	1.09
Mission		
11. The values within the athletic department mirror those of the university.	4.24	.77
12. The university administration expects athletics to contribute to the mission of the university.	4.38	.64
13. The athletic department contributes to the mission of the university.	4.47	.56
University Status		
14. Competing in Division I athletics enhances the university's influence and presence within its geographic region.	4.27	.71
15. Competing in Division I athletics enhances the status of my university.	4.35	.66
16. If we do not compete in Division I athletics, we will fall behind our peer institutions.	4.03	.85