

# A Smaller Window to the University: The Impact of Athletic De-Escalation on Status and Reputation

**Michael Hutchinson**

The University of Memphis

**Daniel A. Rascher**

University of San Francisco

**Kimi Jennings**

The University of Memphis

Given the changing landscape of Division I athletic competition, determining the most advantageous commitment to athletic programs is an important issue in sport and university policy. With the recent autonomy granted to select Division I Football Bowl Subdivision conferences and pending antitrust litigation vying for college athlete compensation, many universities are considering alternative courses of action in reducing their existing commitment to Division I athletics. Accordingly, this study sought to examine the impact of de-escalating Division I commitment—specifically discontinuing a Division I football program—on the status and reputation of the university and athletic department. In considering the entire population of universities which have discontinued their Division I football program from 1981 to 2010 ( $N = 21$ ), the results revealed that football program discontinuation had little positive or negative impact on academic status and reputation, and a slight negative impact on athletic status. The implications of this research contributes important information on assessing previous decisions to discontinue a Division I football program and what became of those decisions.

**Keywords:** de-escalation of commitment, status, reputation, intercollegiate athletics, NCAA, Division I athletics, athletic administration, college football

Within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the Division I classification is experiencing changes to its traditional operating model, most

---

Hutchinson and Jennings are with the Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management, The University of Memphis, Memphis, TN. Rascher is with the Sport Management Program, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA. Address author correspondence to Michael Hutchinson at [michael.hutchinson@memphis.edu](mailto:michael.hutchinson@memphis.edu).

notably in allowing schools to provide more benefits to college athletes. For instance, the NCAA recently granted the top five Division I Football Bowl Sub-division (FBS) conferences (hereafter “Power 5”)<sup>1</sup> the freedom to offer additional privileges including cost of attendance stipends for college athletes, less restrictive recruiting policies, and increased staff sizes (Tracy, 2014). Further, pending antitrust litigation may allow Division I football (FBS only) and men’s basketball athletes the opportunity for additional compensation beyond athletic scholarships for use of their name, image, or likeness (Berkowitz, 2014). Depending on court rulings, there is the eventual possibility for an open market that would allow universities to compete for a student’s athletic abilities by offering a variety of copious benefits that include cash payments (Eder, 2014). Consequently, some believe that more Division I universities—notably those in non-Power 5 conferences—will reduce their commitment to athletics in similar fashion to the University of Alabama-Birmingham’s (UAB) initial—but not final—decision to discontinue its FBS football program (Berkowitz, 2015; Infante, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Amid the heightened challenges ahead for non-Power 5 universities, continuing to sponsor Division I athletics—specifically a Division I football program—may still provide financial or economic benefit to universities (Rascher & Schwarz, 2015). Yet an increasing number of universities believe their existing Division I commitment to be a failing course of action, with some already having decided to de-escalate commitment (Hutchinson & Bouchet, 2014b). Historically, this reduced commitment to Division I athletics has primarily manifested in discontinuing the football program, reclassifying to a lower NCAA division, or discontinuing the athletic department altogether. While the economic rationale for these decisions is debatable, Division I has seen an increase in the number of universities by 75 since the landmark decision in *NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, et al.* (1984),<sup>3</sup> with a jump in FBS football programs from 105 to 127 in 2014–2015. It is an interesting dynamic whereby universities consider de-escalating their Division I commitment, yet continue to invest more and more in Division I athletics. An important component of the decision process ought to be the impact of de-escalation on both the status and reputation of the university and athletic department. While a substantial body of research has examined the impact of maintaining or increasing commitment to Division I athletics, limited research has considered the impact of decreasing commitment to Division I athletics and the university (Jones, 2014). Since the NCAA split Division I into three subdivisions in 1978, only a handful of Division I universities have reduced their commitment to athletics. Of the universities having decreased their commitment to Division I athletics, the vast majority opted to do so by discontinuing their football program (Hutchinson & Bouchet, 2014b). Therefore, using escalation of commitment theory as a framework, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of discontinuing a Division I football program on the status and reputation of the university and athletic department.

## De-Escalation of Commitment

Escalation of commitment theory describes individuals and organizations that maintain and often increase commitment to a venture or course of action amid prolonged evidence of ambiguous or negative outcomes (Staw, 1981). Escalation research has

predominantly examined circumstances in which substantial resources were invested in a course of action that did not produce the desired outcome—frequently intended to generate a financial or economic return.<sup>4</sup> Over time, this behavior becomes a true escalation of commitment in the decision to repeatedly persist in a course of action given the presence of ambiguous or negative outcomes. While the logical solution to an escalation scenario would be commitment reduction, researchers have long identified the interplay of four determinants—project, psychological, social, and structural—influencing persistence in a failing course of action (Staw & Ross, 1987). Given extensive investigation of escalation behavior, less research has empirically examined both theoretical and practical applications of de-escalation of commitment (Mähring, Keil, Mathiassen, & Pries-Heje, 2008). Although initially acknowledged as withdrawal or abandonment from a failing course of action (see Staw & Ross, 1987), de-escalation behavior also manifests in a reduction of commitment by considering alternative courses of action (Montealegre & Keil, 2000). Therefore, de-escalation of commitment can be defined as the process of breaking an escalation cycle by reducing or redirecting the original failing course of action. To date, research has almost exclusively focused on the factors and processes for de-escalation in a variety of field-based qualitative case studies (see Hutchinson, 2013; Hutchinson & Bouchet, 2014a, 2014b; Keil & Montealegre, 2000; Keil & Robey, 1999; Mähring et al., 2008; Montealegre & Keil, 2000). Yet, limited research has investigated the subsequent impact of de-escalation decisions on the performance of an organization.

## De-Escalation in Division I Athletics

Within sport, the context of Division I athletics has served as the exclusive setting for investigating de-escalation behavior. Studies of athletics-based de-escalation have examined universities that recognized their commitment to Division I as a failing course of action. The overwhelming majority of universities acknowledged athletics as a failing course of action due to the financial expense not providing a comparable financial return, economic benefit, or otherwise spillover effect (e.g., increased enrollment). Consequently, select universities have reduced or redirected the extent of commitment to athletics participation (see Hutchinson & Bouchet, 2014b).<sup>5</sup> As an example, Hutchinson (2013) operationalized Division I athletic de-escalation of commitment in three capacities: (a) discontinuing a Division I football program, (b) reclassifying from Division I to a lower division (e.g., Division II, III) or athletic association (e.g., National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics [NAIA]), and (c) restructuring a Division I athletic department (for an example, see Vanderbilt University [Pope, 2008]). While university decisions to de-escalate athletic programs are determined following extensive research, the actual impact on the university and athletic department has yet to be comprehensively examined.

Researchers have extensively studied the impact of Division I athletics on universities, primarily focusing on football (chiefly FBS and Football Championship Subdivision [FCS] levels of competition) and men's basketball. Generally speaking, these studies have investigated the various impacts of maintaining or increasing commitment to Division I athletics including marketing and brand exposure effects, positive and negative financial and economic effects, admission applications and quality of students admitted effects, and status or prestige effects

**Table 1 Impact of Division I Athletics**

Topic	References	Application
Division I Athletics	Beyer and Hannah (2000)	These publications provide scholarly research of the marketing/branding effects (specifically university brand exposure) gained from competition in Division I athletics.
	Clotfelter (2011)	
	Frank (2004)	
	Goff (2000, 2004)	
	Roy, Graeff, and Harmon (2008)	
	Shulman and Bowen (2001)	
	Sperber (2000)	
	Tucker (2005)	
	Zimbalist (1999)	
	Baade and Sundberg (1996)	
	Borland, Goff, and Pulsinelli (1992)	
	Daughtrey and Stotlar (2000)	
	Frank (2004)	
	Frieder and Fulks (2007)	
	Grimes and Chressanthi (1994)	
	Howell and Rascher (2011)	
	Hughes and Shank (2008)	
	Humphreys and Mondello (2007)	
	Koo and Dittmore (2014)	
	Meer and Rosen (2009)	
	Orszag and Israel (2009)	
	Orszag and Orszag (2005a, 2005b)	
	Rascher and Schwarz (2015)	
	Rhoads and Gerking (2000)	
	Schwarz (2011)	
	Skousen and Condie (1988)	
Stinson and Howard (2007)		
Tucker (2004)		
Turner, Meserve, and Bowen (2001)		

*(continued)*

(for a more comprehensive list of references, see Table 1). However, limited research has considered the actual positive and negative consequences to the university of de-escalating commitment to Division I athletics. With recent research indicating the importance of status and reputation attainment in increasing commitment to Division I athletics (Hutchinson, Nite, & Bouchet, 2015), it is imperative to understand the impact of de-escalating athletic commitment on the status and reputation of the university and athletic department.

**Table 1 (continued)**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>Application</b>
Division I Athletics	Chressanthis and Grimes (1993)	These publications provide scholarly research concerning the impact (or lack of impact) of Division I athletics on university admission applications, enrollment, and the quality of students admitted to a university.
	Chung (2013)	
	Frank (2004)	
	Goff (2000)	
	Jones (2009)	
	Lieber (2004)	
	McEvoy (2005, 2006)	
	Mixon and Hsing (1994)	
	Mixon and Ressler (1995)	
	Murphy and Trandel (1994)	
	Noll (2004)	
	Pope and Pope (2009, 2014)	
	Toma and Cross (1998)	
	Tucker and Amato (2006)	
	Beyer and Hannah (2000)	These publications provide scholarly research concerning the role and/or impact (or lack of impact) of status or prestige in competing in Division I athletics.
	Bouchet and Hutchinson (2010)	
	Bouchet, Laird, Troilo, Hutchinson, and Ferris (in press)	
	Dwyer, Eddy, Havard, and Braa (2010)	
	Goidel and Hamilton (2006)	
	Goff (2000)	
Hutchinson, Nite, and Bouchet (2015)		
Kelly and Dixon (2011)		
Simon (2008)		

Within studies of organizations, there has been a “renewed interest in understanding the impact of status and reputation on organizational outcomes” (Patterson, Cavazos, & Washington, 2014, p. 74). According to Washington and Zajac (2005), status is a sociological concept that considers “differences in social rank that generate privilege or discrimination” while reputation is an economic concept that captures “differences in perceived or actual quality or merit that generate earned, performance-based rewards” (p. 283). At the time of this study, only two investigations had considered in part the measurable impact of decreasing commitment to Division I athletics. First, Goff (2000) used regression analysis to estimate enrollment changes at the University of Texas at Arlington (discontinued FBS program in 1986) and Wichita State University (discontinued FBS program in 1987). The

findings indicated that university enrollment decreased roughly 600 students when compared with years in which football was sponsored. Second, Jones (2014) used difference-in-differences estimation to examine the impact of discontinuing football on freshmen application trends at East Tennessee State University, Saint Mary's College of California, and Siena College (each of which discontinued their FCS program in 2004). In comparing these three universities to peer universities that maintained their FCS program, Jones found that football discontinuation was largely uncorrelated with reductions in freshmen admission applications.

While these studies provide a starting point for better understanding the impact of de-escalating commitment to Division I athletics, they are limited in two principal capacities. First, both provide a very small sample size ( $N = 2$  [Goff, 2000];  $N = 3$  [Jones, 2014]) when considering the total population of universities available for examination. This substantially limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, these studies investigated only two variables of impact regarding academic status: enrollment and freshmen application trends. Neither study considered other status and reputation variables that may impact the university and athletic department. Therefore, this study focused on several status- and reputation-related variables in examining the entire population of universities having discontinued their Division I football program following the NCAA's establishment of three Division I subdivisions in 1978.

## Status and Reputation Variables

Research has identified several variables that measure status and reputation in the university and athletic department setting (see Bouchet, Laird, Troilo, Hutchinson, & Ferris, in press; Washington & Zajac, 2005). For this study, we followed the approach of Bouchet et al. (in press) in collecting data from several variables to provide a comprehensive representation of the impact of de-escalation on status and reputation. In conjunction with their associated construct, data collected were as follows: academic status variables included Carnegie Classification and *U.S. News & World Report Ranking*; academic reputation variables included the number of university applicants, ACT/SAT scores sent to universities, and average freshman ACT/SAT scores; athletic status variables included Sagarin ratings (men's basketball) and Associated Press poll rankings (men's basketball, women's basketball); and the athletic reputation variable included Director's Cup rankings. Further, additional control variables were collected that included geographic (state) location, state population, state population growth, state gross domestic product, university enrollment, and university endowment.

Amid these efforts for a comprehensive examination, only four variables had a sufficient number of observations (i.e., available data) to conduct statistical analyses. These included a single measure of athletic success and three measures of academic success. Athletic status was measured using Sagarin Ratings for men's basketball (Source: *USA Today Sagarin Ratings*). Computed by Jeff Sagarin, the Sagarin Ratings is a method for rating and ranking a variety of professional and amateur sport teams. For purposes of this study, we used the Sagarin Ratings for all NCAA Division I men's basketball teams. Using a synthesis of three different methods, Sagarin Ratings provide an overall ranking where high performing teams produce a lower number (e.g., ranking of 16) and low performing teams produce

a higher number (e.g., ranking of 236). Thus, the lower the ranking, the better the team. The Sagarin Men's Basketball Rating was included as a result of some universities desiring to reinvest excess funds recouped from discontinuing football in other sport team offerings, often men's basketball (Hutchinson, 2013; Jaschik, 2009; Sperber, 2009; Watts, 2015).

Academic reputation, quality of incoming students, and demand was measured using *U.S. News & World Report* (USNWR) Rankings<sup>6</sup> (Source: USNWR), incoming average SAT scores (Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS] Data Center, Institutional common data sets), and university enrollment (Source: IPEDS Data Center, Institutional common data sets). Notwithstanding the criticisms of academic ranking systems, the USNWR's annual ranking of academic quality is widely circulated and impacts decision making by entering baccalaureate students (Morse, 2011). Universities have also stated that one reason for discontinuing football was to be able to reallocate resources toward academic improvement (see Hutchinson, 2013; Jaschik, 2009; Sperber, 2009). A better ranking by USNWR is consistent with this idea. Concurrent with the stated goal of higher academic reputation is attracting more and better students. Thus, analyses of incoming average SAT scores were undertaken as well as analyses of the enrollment figures for incoming freshmen.

Accordingly, the limited availability of data and relative dearth of research on this topic led to the following four research questions that guided this exploratory study:

**RQ1:** Did the men's basketball program improve after discontinuing football?

**RQ2:** Did *U.S. News & World Report's Colleges and Universities* ranking improve after discontinuing football?

**RQ3:** Did SAT scores for incoming freshmen improve after discontinuing football?

**RQ4:** Did the university increase enrollments after discontinuing football?

## Method

While Bouchet et al. (in press) investigated universities increasing commitment to Division I athletics, this study examined the impact of discontinuing a Division I football program on the status and reputation of the university and athletic department. Originally, de-escalation behavior was operationalized in three capacities: (a) discontinuing a Division I football program, (b) reclassifying from Division I to a lower division (e.g., Division II, Division III) or athletic association (e.g., NAIA), and (c) discontinuing a Division I athletic department altogether. Upon data collection conclusion, discontinuing a Division I football program was the only event to provide sufficient data to measure the pre- and post-impact of such a decision.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the population of all Division I universities having discontinued their FBS or FCS football program ( $N = 21$ ) from 1981 to 2010 were included in the current study (see Table 2). Following the NCAA's decision to offer three Division I subdivisions in 1978, the year 1981 was selected due to the multiyear grace period for universities' optional transition between classifications throughout 1979 and 1980; therefore, data were not collected for these years.

In similar fashion to Bouchet et al. (in press), each of the four outcome variables was compared pre- and post-decision to discontinue football. Specifically, the

**Table 2 Division I Universities Discontinuing Football (1981–2010)**

Institution	Football Classification	First Year Without Football
University of Texas at Arlington	FBS	1986–1987
Southeastern Louisiana University	FCS	1986–1987
Wichita State University	FBS	1987–1988
Lamar University	FBS	1990–1991
California State University, Long Beach	FBS	1992–1993
California State University, Fullerton	FBS	1993–1994
University of the Pacific	FBS	1996–1997
Boston University	FCS	1998–1999
University of Evansville	FCS	1998–1999
California State University, Northridge	FCS	2002–2003
Canisius College	FCS	2003–2004
Fairfield University	FCS	2003–2004
St. John's University	FCS	2003–2004
East Tennessee State University	FCS	2004–2005
Siena College	FCS	2004–2005
St. Mary's College of California	FCS	2004–2005
St. Peter's University	FCS	2007–2008
La Salle University	FCS	2008–2009
Iona College	FCS	2009–2010
Northeastern University	FCS	2010–2011
Hofstra University	FCS	2010–2011

average USNWR ranking for the five years before discontinuing football and the five years after discontinuing football (with the year of discontinuation excluded) were compared. This aided in smoothing out any perturbation from a single year and allowed time for the changes to take place. The sufficiency of using five years before and after the change in status is shown by analyzing the coefficient of variation (CV) in the data during each of the subperiods to see if the data show low variability to be representative. The resulting CV calculations show an average CV of less than 0.2 across the outcome variables. While there is not a critical level for CV, researchers note that a CV of 1 is quite high, showing a lot of variability, and a CV of 0.1 or 0.2 is very low and generally sufficient (Dunn & Clark, 2009; Kalton, 1983).

An average of the five years before the decision was compared with the average of the five years after the decision across the outcome variables. This was done systematically in a single estimation method across all of the universities in the sample. The comparison method was an unpaired *t* test of the differences in means over the two time periods.<sup>8</sup> A more comprehensive analysis that included control



variables like marketing expenditures (i.e., if a school spends more on marketing it might receive a larger pool of candidates from which to choose, thus enrolling a higher quality incoming class) was not possible given there were only 21 observations. In other words, the population size was too small to conduct anything more than a straightforward comparison of means. Importantly, given that this is the total population of universities discontinuing Division I football since 1978, it is a comprehensive methodology and provides insight into the impact of the action.

## Results

In answering RQ1, all schools on the list averaged being ranked 148 (median of 135) in the Sagarin Men's Basketball Rankings during the five years before discontinuing football ( $M = 148, SD = 53$ ). After discontinuing football, those same schools averaged being ranked 176 ( $M = 176, SD = 56$ ), with a median of 183. The pre- and post-rankings are statistically significantly different from each other ( $t(38) = -1.6119, p = .0576$ ), and show that the men's basketball programs did not benefit, and actually suffered, from football being discontinued.

For RQ2, the sample size was less ( $n = 11$ ) due to earlier football discontinuation dates in the 1980s not corresponding with USNWR actually putting out rankings, or those schools were not ranked by USNWR. The average predrop rankings were 66 ( $M = 66, SD = 53$ ), with the postdrop rankings being 70 ( $M = 70, SD = 55$ ). The medians were 60 and 63, respectively. These are not statistically significantly different from each other ( $t(22) = -0.1922, p = .4247$ ). Thus, the schools did not improve their academic ranking after discontinuing football.

In addressing RQ3, the available sample of universities ( $n = 15$ ) experienced an average SAT score increase from 1,078–1,105 ( $M = 1,078, SD = 110; M = 1,105, SD = 146$ ), with the median increasing from 1,095–1,104. This is not statistically significant ( $t(27) = -0.8724, p = .1953$ ), implying that there was no change in SAT scores during the five years before dropping football compared with the five years afterward. It is important to note that the average SAT score for all reporting universities grew from 994 in 1980–1,028 in 2005.<sup>9</sup>

For RQ4, the available sample of universities ( $n = 18$ ) reported enrollments for the years preceding and after discontinuing football. Those enrollments averaged 15,728 ( $M = 15,278, SD = 12,283$ ) before discontinuing football and 16,081 ( $M = 16,081, SD = 12,453$ ) afterward, a growth of 2.2% over those time periods (medians were 9,993 and 10,233). The difference is not statistically significant ( $t(35) = -0.0597, p = .4764$ ), thus discontinuing football did not correspond with any increases in enrollments. Importantly, during five-year increments from 1985 through 2000, average enrollment grew by 6.2%, meaning that on average, the schools that discontinued football grew more slowly than the average school across the United States.

## Discussion

The findings from this study provide contributions to both theory and the existing body of research. From a theoretical standpoint, this investigation served as the first quantitative study to consider the role of status and reputation in de-escalation

of commitment. Within our context—and among the population of universities having discontinued a Division I football program—the findings indicated that universities can expect little positive or negative impact to academic status and reputation, and a slight negative impact to athletic status.<sup>10</sup> The primary theoretical contribution from this study related to the potential for changing the perception of how de-escalation of commitment is viewed by stakeholders. For instance, within the context of intercollegiate athletics, prior research investigating the process of de-escalation revealed how stakeholders viewed reducing commitment to Division I athletics as not only undesirable, but likely to produce negative consequences to the university and athletic department (see Hutchinson & Bouchet, 2014b). However, at certain universities, our findings revealed de-escalation of commitment—manifest in football program discontinuation—as unlikely to produce substantial positive or negative consequences. Thus, while organizational stakeholders may view de-escalation behavior as unfavorable, theoretically, the tangible impact on the university and athletic department should not necessarily be perceived as negative in nature.

This contribution has the potential to be a valuable addition to Montealegre and Keil's (2000) process model of de-escalation. In their model, organizations progress through four phases in the de-escalation process: problem recognition, reexamination of the prior course of action, searching for an alternative course of action, and implementing an exit strategy. Within the implementing an exit strategy phase, two primary triggering activities<sup>11</sup> involve appealing to stakeholders and de-institutionalizing the course of action. As investigated by Hutchinson and Bouchet (2014a), this final phase is especially challenging for decision makers due in part to the uncertainty associated with the decision to de-escalate and its impact on the university and athletic department. Our findings provide useful information in appealing to stakeholders and de-institutionalizing the course of action in that decision makers can use these findings as a basis for reducing negative perceptions associated with de-escalation, thus easing concerns among some—certainly not all—stakeholders.

The findings from this study also further our understanding of research related to reducing commitment to intercollegiate athletics. The current study extends the research of Goff (2000) and Jones (2014) by examining more variables and investigating the entire population of universities having discontinued a Division I football program. These findings provide a comprehensive overview of all universities having discontinued their Division I football program and the subsequent impact on the status and reputation of both the university and athletic department. Certainly, adding to the existing literature would have been enhanced had there been sufficient data to examine other variables representing status and reputation. Regardless, these findings provide valuable information and potential future direction for investigating commitment reduction at other levels of competition (e.g., NCAA Division II, NCAA Division III).

## Implications

Beyond these contributions, the findings also provide universities with practical information for making a more informed decision regarding commitment to a Division I football program. As noted on several occasions above, the implications should be considered in light of the population of universities discontinuing

a Division I football program—that of mostly Division I FCS and select Division I FBS (non-Power 5) competing members. Further, the implications also depend on the individual university, and should be considered in light of (a) the financial and economic gain or loss of the football program and (b) the extent of university reliance in using the football program for marketing purposes. Consequently, the findings provide two principle implications for universities to consider.

First, for select universities, the loss of marketing aspects of football may counteract whatever gain exists. Research has revealed how competition in Division I—notably sponsoring a Division I football program—can generate widespread university exposure through media coverage of athletics (Clotfelter, 2011) and also positively impact the public perception of a university's academic quality (Goidel & Hamilton, 2006; Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008). Assuming football program profitability, this would not even be a reallocation of money. For example, Rascher and Schwarz (2015) point out that UAB football was actually providing a gain in net income for the university rather than a loss. At UAB, this was due to athletic scholarships costing far less than their listed prices, the financial value of FBS conference membership compared with an alternative non-FBS conference, and the revenue from the College Football Playoff outpacing new expense categories like unlimited food and cost of attendance stipends. Consequently, from a marketing perspective, part of the “front porch” of the university is gone and there is no concomitant improvement in academics or in the rest of athletics. In application, this may be particularly beneficial for select universities—notably those competing in the FBS—that experience a financial or economic gain from the football program and rely heavily on it for university marketing purposes.

Second, and conversely, the results of this study may also be a motivating factor for discontinuing a Division I football program. For instance, universities with a football program that is producing a net loss and does not serve to substantially market the university may view these findings as the impetus for discontinuation with little to no negative consequences. Examples of such universities are those likely competing as lower performing FBS members and most FCS members. However, the analysis presented here does not include the possible negative impact of de-escalation on donations to the university (Stinson & Howard, 2007), diversity of the student body (Pope & Pope, 2007), and retention and graduation rates of nonathlete students (Mixon & Trevino, 2005). Yet, in application, discontinuing football may be beneficial for select universities investing valuable and often scarce financial resources in a Division I program that produces limited revenue and minimal marketing benefits from program sponsorship.

## Conclusion

This study sought to examine the impact of de-escalating Division I commitment—specifically discontinuing a Division I football program—on the status and reputation of the university and athletic department. The results inform select universities that discontinuing a Division I football program will have little positive or negative impact on academic status and reputation, and a slight negative impact on athletic status. The primary limitation of this study was data availability. While several measures of both status and reputation were collected, much of the data originally planned for analysis simply did not exist. Consequently, a more comprehensive

assessment of status and reputation was not attainable. A secondary limitation is related to generalizability given the population of universities having discontinued a Division I football program. In addition to a large majority of the population having competed in the FCS, the few FBS universities discontinuing a football program were non-Power 5 members doing so in excess of 20 years in the past (excluding University of the Pacific). Consequently, generalizing these findings to many FBS competing universities is likely not appropriate.

Future research should consider several areas of inquiry. First, from a broad de-escalation of commitment perspective, other sport and nonsport settings should be examined to realize the impact of reducing commitment to a failing course of action. Second, within the context of intercollegiate athletics, universities in other NCAA divisions or athletic associations having de-escalated commitment (e.g., discontinuing a football program, reclassifying to a lower division or alternate athletic association, discontinuing the athletic department altogether) should be examined for determining if similar findings exist. Finally, researchers should investigate universities that have increased their commitment to athletics (e.g., reclassifying from Division II to Division I, transitioning from the FCS to FBS) to determine any impact on the status and reputation of the university and athletic department. Given the changing landscape of Division I athletics, determining the most beneficial commitment to athletic programs is an important issue in sport and university policy. Most notably, this research adds important information on assessing previous decisions to discontinue a Division I football program and what became of those decisions.

## Notes

1. The Power 5 conferences include the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference (Big 10), Big 12 Conference (Big 12), Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12), and Southeastern Conference (SEC).
2. UAB is scheduled to reinstate football in 2017.
3. In 1981, the NCAA announced the adoption of a college football television plan that would reduce the negative effect of live television on game attendance by (a) limiting the amount of televised college football games, (b) the number of games that any one university may televise, and (c) not allowing for the sale of individual university television rights (except in accordance with the plan). Threatened with disciplinary action should they pursue television agreements inconsistent with the new television plan, College Football Association (CFA) universities filed a federal lawsuit claiming that the NCAA was violating the Sherman Antitrust Act by restraining competition in the relevant market of “live college football television.” Following a series of appeals, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the NCAA’s television plan was in violation of the Sherman Act and thus disallowed from implementation. This ruling provided CFA universities and athletic conferences the option of pursuing television agreements that produced a higher ceiling of revenue generation.
4. While most escalation circumstances involve outcomes related to financial return or economic impact, Staw (1981) originally identified additional outcomes that extend beyond financial or economic pursuits (for examples, see p. 577–578).
5. Similar to the current study, the universities sampled in Hutchinson (2013) self-identified their escalation of commitment. Thus, determining escalation—and subsequent de-escalation—was not a matter for researcher discretion. Determining escalation of commitment among universities

that remain committed to Division I (notably a FBS or FCS football program) is far more challenging, as there are a variety of tangible (e.g., finance and economics) and intangible (e.g., sense of community) factors for consideration (see Frieder & Fulks, 2007; Rascher & Schwarz, 2015).

6. This data are from the actual academic year (e.g., the 2014–2015 edition was based on Fall 2013 data; thus, the 2014–2015 edition ranking is associated with 2013–2014 academic year data).

7. Universities reclassifying to a lower NCAA division or alternate athletic association and universities discontinuing their Division I athletic department altogether did not provide a sufficient number of universities for observation, as well as inconsistent and insufficient data. For example, from 1981 to present day, only four universities reclassified to a lower division or alternate classification—all of which reclassified to NCAA Division III. Two of these four did so in the mid-1980s and early 1990s; thus, data were limited. Similarly, from 1981 to present day, only three universities discontinued their Division I athletic department altogether. Only two of the three were seriously considered due to contextual considerations (i.e., Morris Brown College lost its NCAA accreditation due to substantial university financial circumstances) and data were greatly limited for those two given the timing of the decision (early and mid-1990s).

8. Creating an average of the five years prior and after the decision to deescalate and then conducting a differences in means test is a more stringent test than simply analyzing a differences in means treating each year as if it were an independently generated event (that would be about 100 observations instead of about 20, depending on which outcome variable is being analyzed). This is akin to a “between effects” regression for a panel data set that takes the average of each group within the panel and then analyzes it statistically. It is a more stringent test because having a similar number appear five times repeatedly in the sample is essentially creating five false observations out of what is really one observation (e.g., a school’s typical incoming SAT score for a number of years).

9. These figures were obtained from <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0883611.html>

10. These findings should be applied in light of individual university circumstances. For instance, a large majority of universities discontinuing a Division I football program competed within the Division I FCS. Accordingly, one should consider that there likely exists a substantial difference in the impact of discontinuing a football program on a university competing in a Division I FBS Power 5 conference and a university in a Division I FBS non-Power 5 conference. A similar comparison can be likened to a university in a Division I FBS non-Power 5 conference and a university in a Division I FCS conference.

11. Within the process model of de-escalation, Montealegre and Keil (2000) identified several triggering activities within each of the four phases that facilitate progression and completion of de-escalating commitment.

## References

- Baade, R.A., & Sundberg, J.O. (1996). Fourth down and gold to go? Assessing the link between athletics and alumni giving. *Social Science Quarterly*, 77, 789–803.
- Berkowitz, S. (2014, August 8). Judge releases ruling on O’Bannon case: NCAA loses. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/college/2014/08/08/ed-obannon-antitrust-lawsuit-vs-ncaa/13801277/>
- Berkowitz, S. (2015, May 27). NCAA board chairman: Big schools’ problem isn’t revenue, it’s spending. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/college/2015/05/27/ncaa-athletic-finances-division-i/28018269/>
- Beyer, J.M., & Hannah, D.R. (2000). The cultural significance of athletics in U.S. higher education. *Journal of Sport Management*, 14, 105–132.
- Borland, M.V., Goff, B.L., & Pulsinelli, R.W. (1992). College athletics: Financial burden or boon? *Advances in the Economics of Sport*, 1, 215–235.

- Bouchet, A., Laird, M. D., Troilo, M., Hutchinson, M., & Ferris, G. (in press). Effects of increased commitment on reputation and status: Evidence from NCAA Division I universities. *Sport Management Review*.
- Bouchet, A., & Hutchinson, M. (2010). Organizational escalation to an uncertain course of action: A case study of institutional branding at Southern Methodist University. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 3, 272–295.
- Chressanthis, G.A., & Grimes, P.W. (1993). Intercollegiate sports success and first-year student enrollment demand. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 10, 286–300.
- Chung, D.J. (2013). The dynamic advertising effect of collegiate athletics. *Marketing Science*, 32, 679–698. doi:10.1287/mksc.2013.0795
- Clotfelter, C.T. (2011). *Big-time sports in American universities*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511976902
- Daughtrey, C., & Stotlar, D. (2000). Donations: Are they affected by a football championship? *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 9, 185–193.
- Dunn, O.J., & Clark, V.A. (2009). *Basic statistics: A primer for the biomedical sciences* (4th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. doi:10.1002/9780470496862
- Dwyer, B., Eddy, T., Havard, C., & Braa, L. (2010). Stakeholder perceptions of an athletic program's reclassification from NCAA Division II to NCAA Division I (FCS) membership: A case study. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 3, 76–97.
- Eder, S. (2014, August 28). A legal titan of sports labor disputes sets his sights on the N.C.A.A.: Jeffrey Kessler envisions open market for college athletes. *The New York Times*, pp. B14.
- Frank, R.H. (2004). Challenging the myth: A review of the links among college athletic success, student quality, and donations. *Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics*. Retrieved from [http://www.knightcommission.org/images/pdfs/kcia\\_frank\\_report\\_2004.pdf](http://www.knightcommission.org/images/pdfs/kcia_frank_report_2004.pdf)
- Frieder, L.L., & Fulks, D.L. (2007). The impact of reclassification from Division II to D1-AA and from Division I-AA to I-A on NCAA member institutions from 1993 to 2003. *NCAA Publications*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/IMREC03.pdf>
- Goff, B. (2000). Effects of university athletics on the university: A review and extension of empirical assessment. *Journal of Sport Management*, 14, 85–104.
- Goff, B. (2004). Effects of university athletics on the university: A review and extension of empirical assessment. In S. R. Rosner and K. L. Shropshire (Eds.), *The Business of Sports*, 540–550. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.
- Goidel, R.K., & Hamilton, J.M. (2006). Strengthening higher education through gridiron success? Public perceptions of the impact of national football championships on academic quality. *Social Science Quarterly*, 87, 851–862. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6237.2006.00439.x
- Grimes, P.W., & Chressanthis, G.A. (1994). Alumni contributions to academics: The role of intercollegiate sports and NCAA sanctions. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 53, 27–40. doi:10.1111/j.1536-7150.1994.tb02669.x
- Howell, J., & Rascher, D.A. (2011). An analysis and assessment of intercollegiate athletics at the University of San Francisco. University of San Francisco (Unpublished Report).
- Hughes, S., & Shank, M. (2008). Assessing the impact of NCAA scandals: An exploratory analysis. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 3, 78–99. doi:10.1504/IJSM.2008.015962
- Humphreys, B.R., & Mondello, M. (2007). Intercollegiate athletic success and donations at NCAA Division I institutions. *Journal of Sport Management*, 21, 265–280.
- Hutchinson, M. (2013). Initiating institutional redirection: Factors for de-escalation of commitment in Division I athletic departments. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 6, 114–130.
- Hutchinson, M., & Bouchet, A. (2014a). Achieving organizational de-escalation: Exit strategy implementation among United States collegiate athletic departments. *Sport Management Review*, 17, 347–361. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2013.09.004

- Hutchinson, M., & Bouchet, A. (2014b). Organizational redirection in highly bureaucratic environments: De-escalation of commitment among Division I athletic departments. *Journal of Sport Management*, 28, 143–161. doi:10.1123/jsm.2012-0303
- Hutchinson, M., Nite, C., & Bouchet, A. (2015). Escalation of commitment in United States collegiate athletic departments: An investigation of social and structural determinants of commitment. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29, 57–75. doi:10.1123/JSM.2013-0315
- Infante, J. (2014, December 3). Don't judge viability of mid-major football by UAB, Hawaii. *Sporting News*. Retrieved from <http://www.sportingnews.com/ncaa-football/story/2014-12-03/uab-hawaii-autonomy-dropping-football>
- Jaschik, S. (2009, November 23). Northeastern ends football. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/11/23/football>
- Jones, W.A. (2009). Athletics, applications, and yields: The relationship between successful college football and institutional attractiveness. *College and University*, 85, 11–19.
- Jones, W.A. (2014). Does discontinuing intercollegiate football correlate with institutional attractiveness to potential students? Evidence from three universities. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 7, 92–113.
- Kalton, G. (1983). *Introduction to survey sampling*. Sage University Paper series on Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences, No. 07-035. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Keil, M., & Montealegre, R. (2000). Cutting your losses: How executives can extricate their organizations when big projects go awry. *Sloan Management Review*, 41, 55–68.
- Keil, M., & Robey, D. (1999). Turning around troubled software projects: An exploratory study of the de-escalation of commitment to failing courses of action. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 15, 63–87. doi:10.1080/07421222.1999.11518222
- Kelly, D., & Dixon, M.A. (2011). Becoming a “real university:” The strategic benefits of adding football for NCAA Division I institutions. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 4, 283–303.
- Koo, G.Y., & Dittmore, S.W. (2014). Effects of intercollegiate athletics on private giving in higher education. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 2, 14–24.
- Lieber, R. (2004, March 15). Score! Gonzaga University was struggling financially. Then it started winning basketball games. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB107902127016752673>
- Mähring, M., Keil, M., Mathiassen, L., & Pries-Heje, J. (2008). Making IT project de-escalation happen: An exploration into key roles. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 9, 462–496.
- McEvoy, C. (2005). The relationship between dramatic changes in team performance and undergraduate admissions applications. *The SMART Journal*, 2, 18–24.
- McEvoy, C. (2006). The impact of elite individual athletic performance on university applicants for admission in NCAA Division I-A football. *The Sport Journal*, 9, unpaginated.
- Meer, J., & Rosen, H. (2009). The impact of athletic performance on alumni giving. *Economics of Education Review*, 28, 287–294. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2008.06.003
- Mixon, F.G., & Hsing, Y. (1994). The determinants of out-of-state enrollments in higher education: A Tobit analysis. *Economics of Education Review*, 13, 329–335. doi:10.1016/S0272-7757(05)80056-1
- Mixon, F.G., & Ressler, R.W. (1995). An empirical note on the impact of college athletics on tuition revenues. *Applied Economics Letters*, 2, 383–387. doi:10.1080/758518995
- Mixon, F.G., & Trevino, L.J. (2005). From kickoff to commencement: The positive role of intercollegiate athletics in higher education. *Economics of Education Review*, 24, 97–102. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2003.09.005
- Montealegre, R., & Keil, M. (2000). De-escalating information technology projects: Lessons from the Denver International Airport. *Management Information Systems Quarterly*, 24, 417–447. doi:10.2307/3250968

- Morse, R. (2011, January 27). Students say rankings aren't most important factor in college decision. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/college-rankings-blog/2011/01/27/students-say-rankings-arent-most-important-factor-in-college-decision>
- Murphy, R.G., & Trandel, G.A. (1994). The relation between a university's football record and the size of its applicant pool. *Economics of Education Review*, *13*, 265–270. doi:10.1016/0272-7757(94)90014-0
- Noll, R.C. (2004). The business of college sports and the high cost of winning. In S.R. Rosner & K.L. Shropshire (Eds.), *The business of sports* (pp. 477–491). Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.
- Orszag, J., & Israel, M. (2009). The empirical effects of collegiate athletics: An update based on 2004-2007 data. *NCAA Publications*. Retrieved from [http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/DI\\_MC\\_BOD/DI\\_BOD/2009/April/04,%20\\_Empirical\\_Effects.pdf](http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/DI_MC_BOD/DI_BOD/2009/April/04,%20_Empirical_Effects.pdf)
- Orszag, J., & Orszag, P. (2005a). The empirical effects of collegiate athletics: An update. *NCAA Publications*. Retrieved from [http://ncaa.org/sites/default/files/empirical\\_effects\\_of\\_collegiate\\_athletics\\_update.pdf](http://ncaa.org/sites/default/files/empirical_effects_of_collegiate_athletics_update.pdf)
- Orszag, J., & Orszag, P. (2005b). Empirical effects of Division II intercollegiate athletics. *NCAA Publications*. Retrieved from <http://www.siue.edu/ATHLETIC/TASKFORCE/empirical.pdf>
- Patterson, K.D.W., Cavazos, D.E., & Washington, M. (2014). It does matter how you get to the top: Differentiating status from reputation. *Administrative Sciences*, *4*, 73–86. doi:10.3390/admsci4020073
- Pope, J. (2008, September 8). No athletic department, but much success at Vanderbilt. *USA Today*. Retrieved from [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-09-08-vanderbilt-athletics\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-09-08-vanderbilt-athletics_N.htm)
- Pope, D.G., & Pope, J.C. (2007). Consideration set formation in the college choice process. Unpublished paper, The Wharton School and Virginia Tech.
- Pope, D.G., & Pope, J.C. (2009). The impact of college sports success on the quantity and quality of student applications. *Southern Economic Journal*, *75*, 750–780.
- Pope, D.G., & Pope, J.C. (2014). Understanding college application decisions: Why college sports success matters. *Journal of Sports Economics*, *15*, 107–131. doi:10.1177/1527002512445569
- Rascher, D.A., & Schwarz, A.D. (2015). The incremental benefits and costs of football, bowling, and rifle at the University of Alabama at Birmingham: A primary and secondary study. OSKR. (Unpublished Report). Retrieved from <http://oskr.com/oskr/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/uab-part-1.pdf>
- Rhoads, T.A., & Gerking, S. (2000). Educational contributions, academic quality, and athletic success. *Contemporary Economic Policy*, *18*, 248–258. doi:10.1111/j.1465-7287.2000.tb00022.x
- Roy, D., Graeff, T., & Harmon, S. (2008). Repositioning a university through NCAA Division I-A football membership. *Journal of Sport Management*, *22*, 11–29.
- Schwarz, A. (2011). Bad accounting drives bad decisions: The case of the University of Nebraska, Omaha dropping football. (Unpublished Report).
- Shulman, J.L., & Bowen, W.G. (2001). *The game of life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Simon, R.L. (2008). Does athletics undermine academics? Examining some issues. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, *1*, 40–58.
- Skousen, C.R., & Condie, F.A. (1988). Evaluating a sports program: Goalposts vs. test tubes. *Management Accounting*, *60*, 43–49.
- Sleesman, D.J., Conlon, D.E., McNamara, G., & Miles, J.E. (2012). Cleaning up the big muddy: A meta-analytic review of the determinants of escalation of commitment. *Academy of Management Journal*, *55*, 541–562. doi:10.5465/amj.2010.0696



- Sperber, M. (2000). *Beer and circus: How big-time college sports is crippling undergraduate education*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.
- Sperber, M. (2009, December 4). Wisely dropping football, Hofstra can focus on academics. *Newsday*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsday.com/opinion/oped/wisely-dropping-football-hofstra-can-focus-on-academics-1.1638042>
- Staw, B.M. (1981). The escalation of commitment to a course of action. *Academy of Management Review*, 6, 577–587.
- Staw, B.M., & Ross, J. (1987). Behavior in escalation situations: Antecedents, prototypes, and solutions. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 9, 39–78.
- Stinson, J.L., & Howard, D.R. (2007). Athletic success and private giving to athletic and academic programs at NCAA institutions. *Journal of Sport Management*, 21, 235–264.
- Toma, J.D., & Cross, M.E. (1998). Intercollegiate athletics and student college choice: Understanding the impact of championship seasons on undergraduate applications. *Research in Higher Education*, 39, 633–661. doi:10.1023/A:1018757807834
- Tracy, M. (2014, August 8). N.C.A.A. votes to give richest conferences more autonomy. *The New York Times*, pp. B9.
- Tucker, I.B. (2004). A reexamination of the effect of big-time football and basketball success on graduation rates and alumni giving rates. *Economics of Education Review*, 23, 655–661. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2004.03.001
- Tucker, I.B. (2005). Big-time pigskin success: Is there an advertising effect? *Journal of Sports Economics*, 6, 222–229. doi:10.1177/1527002504263398
- Tucker, I.B., & Amato, L.T. (2006). A reinvestigation of the relationship between big-time basketball success and average SAT scores. *Journal of Sports Economics*, 7, 428–440. doi:10.1177/1527002505275096
- Turner, S.E., Meserve, L.A., & Bowen, W.G. (2001). Winning and giving: Football results and alumni giving at selective private colleges and universities. *Social Science Quarterly*, 82, 812–826. doi:10.1111/0038-4941.00061
- Washington, M., & Zajac, E.J. (2005). Status evolution and competition: Theory and evidence. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48, 282–296. doi:10.5465/AMJ.2005.16928408
- Watts, R.L. (2015, May). Message from the President: UAB Athletics Strategic Planning. Retrieved from <http://www.uab.edu/athleticsplan/announcement/message>
- Zimbalist, A. (1999). *Unpaid professionals*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

## **Erratum, Hutchinson, Rascher, and Jennings (2016)**

The authors failed to cite Bouchet, Laird, Troilo, Hutchinson, and Ferris (in press) in the original manuscript. Appropriate citations of Bouchet et al. (in press) are now included in this corrected article. The online version has been corrected.