BRAND ESTABLISHMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO: AN INVESTIGATION OF DE-ESCALATION OF COMMITMENT IN UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

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Research Problem
The purpose of this study was to examine the internal and external struggles that the administration encountered during the time period that the University of Chicago made the decision to abandon intercollegiate football in 1939. This decision was made at the behest of the then University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins and Board of Trustees in hopes of preserving the university’s academic reputation and mission. This article discusses the decision of a highly selective and academically prestigious research university to abandon Division I athletics during a period of athletic success by its football team. This unprecedented decision by a founding member of one of the nation’s premier athletic conferences, the Big Ten, has left questions about the role of intercollegiate athletics within a highly selective and academically prestigious university. This study utilizes De-escalation of Commitment as a theoretical framework for examining the case of the University of Chicago.

Issue

Escalation of Commitment Theory
Escalation of Commitment theory has been primarily applied within public policy and strategic management literature in order to describe how organizations become engaged in escalating situations (Allison, 1971; Ross & Staw, 1986; Staw, 1976). The concept of escalation has proved popular as it delivers an explanation for organizational investment in failing courses of action (Ross, 2003). Developed by Barry Staw in 1976, Escalation of Commitment is a theory which states that there are “many instances in which individuals [and organizations] can become locked into a costly course of action” (Staw, 1981, p. 577). Staw (1976) revealed that when individuals were personally responsible for a failing course of action, they often increased their investment instead of withdrawing and accepting a loss. According to Staw (1976), the basic tenets of this theory are twofold: 1) one would anticipate individuals to amend any behavior(s) which results in negative consequences, and 2) self-justification plays an important role in the decision making process that led to the escalation behavior (Staw, 1976). However, little research has been conducted on organizations that initiate de-escalation initiatives.

University Branding and Intercollegiate Athletics
Across the nation, institutions of higher learning are making a purposeful effort to develop the overall brand of a university (Judson et al., 2009). Increasingly, institutions of higher learning are realizing that prospective students determine their college choice on the brand of an institution over any other variable (Judson, Gorchels, & Aurand, 2006). Outside the university setting, marketing scholars have discovered the influential nature of branding on consumer beliefs (Beckwith & Lehman, 1975). However, research indicates that this phenomenon
is prevalent within university branding initiatives as well (Judson, et al., 2006). As such, scholars indicate that branding initiatives are only successful if they are properly aligned with the university mission and values (Chapleo, 2005; Clark et al., 2009). As the higher education setting transitions to a more market driven environment, it is imperative for universities to invest in initiatives that will promote their respective brand.

Certainly, most institutions strive to brand their respective university on the basis of academic superiority. However, many institutions rely upon the promotion of intercollegiate athletics to better position the university in an effort to attract students and increase alumni giving. Utilizing athletic programs as an avenue for building the university brand has been a prime factor for the inclusion of numerous football programs over the last decade. For instance, University of North Carolina-Charlotte Chancellor Phillip DuBois stated the following concerning the addition of a new football program to the university: “I do believe that football will enrich the student experience here, enliven school spirit, and serve as one more bond of engagement between the students and their university” (DuBois, 2008, p. 8). This statement embodies what many campus leaders assume and believe: there is a link between university branding and college athletics.

De-escalation in a University Athletics Department

Although many universities have dropped their athletic programs to lower classifications within the NCAA, the University of Chicago is unique in that it is a highly selective university that was a founding member of one of the top athletic conferences in the country yet chose to abandon scholarship football. This study will focus on organizational level de-escalation at a university that struggled to define athletics within the institution, ultimately initiating the unprecedented step of abolishing the football program. Ross and Staw (1993) note that “since escalation research is as much concerned with how organizations get out of losing courses of action as with how those courses expand over time, it is important to examine projects that are not self-terminating” (p. 704). Studying de-escalation at the University of Chicago is an ideal scenario because it is the only institution that competed in a major Division I conference to completely abandon scholarship football.

Summary

Four factors played a role in the de-escalation of athletics at the University of Chicago.

Change in Presidents

When the university was first opened in 1891, President Harper ensured that athletics would be a central part of the institution by hiring Amos A. Stagg. Stagg, a graduate of Yale University, was hired not just as a football coach, but as an associate professor in the Department of Physical Culture. The hiring of Stagg fit neatly into the plans of Harper to establish Chicago as a premier institution of higher learning. Together, Stagg and Harper would use football to promote the institution to both the city and nation. This strategy would prove effective until 1929, when Robert M. Hutchins was appointed president of the University of Chicago. The son of a former college president, Hutchins set out to establish his legacy at the university. Such a legacy would involve attempting to modify the undergraduate curriculum, operating a university consistently strapped for funds, and abolishing varsity football.

Shifting Academic Visions

Prior to the arrival of Hutchins, several university administrators and stakeholders voiced their concern for the undergraduate college. To combat this problem, Deans Wilkins and Boucher authored what came to be known as the “New Plan” during Hutchins inauguration in 1929. President Hutchins had a vastly different viewpoint of the mission of the university than Harper. In his book The Higher Learning in America (1936), Hutchins outlined one of the sources of problems with higher education, that of the “love of money” which subsequently forced the university to “sell its soul.” During Hutchins initial years at the university, as briefly acknowledged above, the faculty passed a revised curriculum known as the “New Plan”. Under the “New Plan”, a significant amendment was the abolishment of physical culture as an undergraduate requirement. This amendment dealt a
blow to Stagg who wanted to use the physical culture requirement to recruit and retain athletes. Consequently, such a requisite loss dismantled Stagg’s player development system (Lawson & Ingham, 1980).

Financial Condition of the Athletic Department

The decline of football was swift at the University of Chicago. Helping expedite this decline was the drastic drop in gate receipts of the football program. This drastic reduction in revenues fostered a climate of doubt regarding the viability of football at the university. The idea of football as a long term investment was further discouraged when the administration decided not to invest in constructing a larger stadium, but simply expanding the existing facility (Lester, 1999). The refusal of the university to build a stadium coincided with an era of unprecedented expenditures devoted to stadium construction by rival universities. Although Chicago was a large city that had a robust history of supporting sports, competition among other alternative sport based initiatives was a significant deterring factor (Lester, 1999). Among the alternative games being offered were from rivals Northwestern University, Notre Dame University, and the University of Illinois, as well as the Chicago Bears of the newly created National Football League.

Change in Coaches

It is clear from both popular press and academic literature that Stagg’s reputation and the escalation of football at Chicago are intertwined. During his tenure at Chicago, Stagg made many changes to the position of head coach. These changes were made with the idea of increasing his power base both inside and outside of the university. However, the culture changed when Hutchins became president. With the appointment of President Hutchins came a reexamination of athletics at the University of Chicago campus. President Hutchins and faculty members never quite accepted the arrangement that Harper had with Stagg and athletics. After failing to come to an agreement with Hutchins on a proper position for himself at the university, Stagg resigned and later accepted a head football coaching position at the University of Pacific. Following Stagg’s departure, the University of Chicago’s football program declined dramatically. Hutchins stated that “unless the football team wins a fair proportion of its games, it does not serve as a rallying point for the undergraduates” (Murphy & Bruckner, 1976, p. 223). In 1939, Hutchins de-emphasized athletics and officially abolished the football program at the University of Chicago.

Analysis

Change in Top Leadership and Project Champions

Previous de-escalation research has noted that a change in top leadership is often needed to force a change in a given course of action as such leaders are commonly committed to maintaining deeply troubled projects (Keil & Robey, 1999). This was especially true at the University of Chicago. When Harper was president of the university, he had a plan to use football (and athletics) to promote the mission and vision of the institution. This philosophy changed when faculty voted to de-emphasize physical education and mandate that university athletics be pursued at the intramural level. The research conducted for this paper indicated that even with a change in presidents, the abolishment of football would not have happened without a change in coaches. Keil and Robey (1999) state that “when project champions leave, or are removed, it is often easier for commitments to be reassessed and de-escalated” (p. 68). In this case, Stagg served as a champion for football at the university and his successor was never able to win the necessary administrative support.

Legitimizing and Establishing the Brand

Unlike Harper, Hutchins was not trying to promote the academic reputation of the University of Chicago brand through its football program. By the time Hutchins was named president of the University of Chicago, the institution was widely considered a first rate academic institution. It no longer needed (or wanted) a football program to enhance and promote the brand of the university. Hutchins main argument was that athletics,
particularly football, were inconsistent with the mission and values of the university. If President Harper’s plan was to use football to enhance and promote the university’s academic reputation, then Hutchins reasoned that with that reputation intact, football was not needed. In fact, Hutchins believed that football and the physical culture requirements were hurting the institution’s undergraduate reputation. Accordingly, Hutchins determined the necessity of focusing efforts on branding the university as one of academic prestige, as opposed to that of athletic prowess.

Implementing an Exit Strategy

As established at the outset, Hutchins was an educational puritan at heart and sharply disagreed with Stagg’s stance regarding the importance of football. However, he was not naive about garnering political support for the abolishment of football. In the years leading up to the removal of football in 1939, Hutchins made several overt attempts at garnering political support from key constituencies. This move was done to lessen the impact that the decision would have on key university stakeholders. For instance, Hutchins began courting a key trustee member, John Nuveen, by providing other Board of Trustee members with memorabilia and anti-football literature from the nations press (Lester, 1999). Leading up to 1939, Hutchins also wrote several public press articles in well-known publications expressing concern over the direction of intercollegiate athletics. As such, these articles were distributed to the university’s Board of Trustees. These tactics, along with Chicago’s winless record, eventually persuaded the board to go along with Hutchins recommendations for the institution’s proposed direction.

Discussion

To this day, the question remains: Did the University of Chicago make the right decision to abandoned Division I athletics? Private institutions like Duke University, Vanderbilt University, and Stanford University are first class academic institutions that also participate in Division I athletics. Certainly, these universities are proof that institutions of higher learning can maintain tough academic requirements and still participate in intercollegiate athletics at the highest level. Perhaps at an institution like the University of Chicago with its rigorous academic study, football could have served as a necessary counterbalance. The abolishment of football at the university does not negate the fact that athletics could have been used as promotional tool for the university.

Although Hutchins decision to abandon football will always be debated and second guessed, there can be little argument that today, years after the decision to abandon football, the University of Chicago remains one of the premier research institutions in the nation. Critics can argue that there are highly selective and academically prestigious institutions that compete in Division I athletics and indeed that is true. However, it deserves mentioning that there are academically prestigious institutions that struggle to compete with large, state supported universities. Another question deserving attention is whether or not this type of decision could be enacted in today’s college athletics environment. With the increased media attention that revenue sports generate, the answer would likely be no. If a university president or Board of Trustees were to abolish or reclassify athletics, there would be tremendous media exposure placed on the institution. The majority of this media exposure would likely be negative in nature as evidenced by the case with Birmingham Southern College. When President E. Gordon Gee abolished the athletic department (but continued Division I athletics) at Vanderbilt University, he was attacked and criticized as an administrator that did not take athletics seriously. As a reminder, Hutchins faced tremendous negative media exposure even before the advent of television for his decision to abolish football at the University of Chicago. In an age when most universities operate in a political environment, this would create what most campus administrators would consider to be unneeded attention on the institution.

The larger question pertains to the extent to which universities use their athletic department’s success to promote the broader brand (e.g., mission and values) of the institution, that of academic excellence. While the research presented displayed that the University of Chicago initially used the football program to promote
academics, the abolishment of the sport has certainly not hurt the institution’s academic reputation and brand. It deserves mentioning that few athletic departments operate without subsidies from the university (Fulks, 2009). Often, these subsidies come in the form of increased student fees or from the university’s central fund. As universities struggle to provide a meaningful education while maintaining reasonable tuition costs, greater attention is paid to how an institution allocates their financial resources. As costs continue to rise for institutions attempting to compete at the Division I level, campus administrators are forced to make hard decisions regarding the role intercollegiate athletics plays on their campuses. This is especially true at private institutions that often do not have the financial resources to compete with large state institutions and are typically more selective in the students they admit. As the delineation continues in Division I athletics between institutions that are willing to engage in escalating athletic budgets and those that do not have the financial resources to do so, it appears that such a decision by President Hutchins was not only courageous but correct.