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Stakeholder Perceptions of an Athletic Program's Reclassification from NCAA Division II to NCAA Division I (FCS) Membership: A Case Study

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At the highest level of intercollegiate athletics, successful programs have the potential to enhance public perception, increase visibility, and enrich prestige for an institution (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Goff, 2000). Due to these potential benefits, university officials are willing to invest tremendous amounts of energy and capital, in the form of a division reclassification, just for the opportunity to compete at this level. This transition, however, is a complex process with substantial consequences for a university and its stakeholders. Employing a mixed methodology, this case study investigated the previous management decisions and current stakeholder perceptions of an institution's recent reclassification from National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II to Division I. The results paralleled previous reclassification research (Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008; Tomasini, 2005), and provided insightful information with regard to stakeholder perceptions of the athletic department, the transition to Division I, and the institution's overall brand of academic quality. For the benefit of university and athletic administrators considering reclassification, vital opportunities, threats, limitations, and the potential for future research related to the topic are discussed.

Intercollegiate athletics play an integral role in higher education as they are often entrenched in the history of an institution. As a socializing medium, athletic contests allow universities to host and interact with publics who may not be directly affiliated with the institution or its educational mission (Melnick, 1993). As a result, successful athletic programs have the potential to enhance public perception, increase visibility, and enrich the perceived prestige of an institution, regardless of academic stature (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Goff, 2000). For this reason, institutions often use athletics as a medium for attracting recognition locally and nationally (Toma, 2003). However, evidence exists that indicates success at the highest level of intercollegiate athletics, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, is much more likely to result in the off-field benefits noted above than success at lower divisions (Daugherty & Stotlar, 2000; Goff, 2000; Stinson & Howard, 2008). For this reason, many university administrators believe that simply moving their athletic program up to NCAA Division I competition will help enhance notoriety, boost student enrollment, and ultimately, increase revenue for the institution (Grant, Leadley & Zygmunt, 2008; Meggyesy, 2000).

This division reclassification, however, has numerous repercussions, both positive and negative, and has the potential to substantially alter the culture and practices of the university as a whole. Thus, when evaluating a potential move to a higher NCAA classification, administrators must consider the different impacts such a transition would have on key stakeholders. However, research in the area of division reclassification is considerably underdeveloped. As a means to fill this gap in the knowledge base, the current mixed-methodological case study analyzed a specific institution's recent reclassification from NCAA Division II to NCAA Division I (Football Championship Subdivision [FCS]) through the recollection of strategic decisions made by current and former administrators, coaches, and faculty facilitators, and the current perceptions of students and alumni. Following a case study design, it was determined that this was best accomplished by examining the university's inner and outer social context (Yin, 2009). Thus, these groups were selected in order to examine the institution as a bounded unit and provide a holistic description of both its current situation and the decisions made leading up to the transition. However, prior to discussing this study's methods and results, previous research investigating reclassification, strategic management, and the potential marketing and brand management implications for reclassifying institutions was examined.

Review of Literature

Strategic Management

Strategic management emphasizes an ongoing process that integrates strategic planning with other management systems. It employs a strategic planning process that is externally oriented, issue focused, and opportunity seeking (Koteen, 1991). Strategic management assesses the situation at hand, internally and externally, designs a desired future, and identifies strategic initiatives, to bring it about (Koteen, 1991). It identifies opportunities, threats, or constraints that lie in the future and provides the basis for decisions that exploit an opportunity or minimize threats or constraints. Additionally, it is important to note that decisions made in early phases of

development can dramatically affect alternatives available later, so a developmental strategy must make sense at each stage and also promise a successful result (Bagley, 2005).

Strategic initiatives are described as collections of finite-duration discretionary projects and programs, outside the organization's day-to-day operational activities, that are designed to help the organization achieve its targeted performance (Kaplan & Norton, 2008).

Reclassification to a new NCAA division certainly qualifies as a strategic initiative under this definition, as the process has a finite duration (roughly 5 years), is discretionary, and is outside of the regular day-to-day operations of an athletic department. It is important to note here that forces that were traditionally believed to influence the operations of athletic departments (i.e., professionalism of top managers and alumni/NCAA pressures) have been found to have less effect than choices made by key personnel within the organization (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). Therefore, strategic initiatives, such as a reclassification effort, can have a profound impact on the long-term success of an athletic department and the institution as a whole.

Miles and Snow (1978) developed a framework for classifying organizational tendencies using four distinct types – prospector, analyzer, defender, and reactor. According to Cunningham (2002), roughly 55% of athletic departments take the form of analyzers which, according to Miles and Snow, are organizations that generally copy other successful firms through extensive scanning of market mechanisms. Cunningham believes that athletic departments often adopt this form in part because of the financial constraints present in intercollegiate athletics. They prefer to see financial opportunities realized in other institutions, then follow suit in order to minimize risk. In the case of reclassification, it appears that some athletic departments see other programs that are similar, in terms of structure and resources, reclassify successfully, and believe that they can do the same. However, there are a host of unique factors at work in each individual case that tend to make the situation more complicated in terms of predicting whether or not a division reclassification will be successful.

One strategic management component that is extremely vital to an organization evaluating a possible reclassification is the marketing implications (Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008; Tomasini, 2005). The reclassification process often creates unrealistic attendance goals and revenue benchmarks that ultimately place a strain on a marketing department to continually attract and retain loyal and engaged audiences (Tomasini, 2005). However, the contemporary sport consumer functions in a highly-cluttered sport marketplace with limited amounts of disposable income and time; thus, it is challenging to introduce a new product and expect instant results. Given this circumstance, it is imperative the potential marketing and brand management implications related to program reclassification are addressed.

Marketing and Brand Implications

From concept to consumer, an organization must continually monitor and manage its product and brand through accurate and effective marketing communication strategies. A university's overall brand identity is often closely intertwined with its athletic program, especially in the case of large Division I institutions (Clark, Apostolopoulou, Bravold, & Synowka, 2009). In fact, the athletic department often takes over as a significant contributor to the brand position of an institution, due to the great amount of exposure that "big-time" college athletics attracts (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998). Additionally, the reclassification of an athletic department may substantially impact the means in which administrators interact with possible consumers due to a significant change in the sport product (Roy et al., 2008). This is

important because these consumers are often vital stakeholders of the sport product and/or the institution as a whole. Thus, to overcome the challenges and to build the desired brand equity in these stakeholders, it is recommended to account for and implement the remaining components of the marketing mix – promotion, price, and place (Borden, 1984; Keller, 1993).

These elements are heavily interrelated, especially with regard to the sport product piece. For instance, the use of too many promotional components, a conventional practice for lower level programs to attract fans, can be both distracting and devalue a sport spectator product. Consumer research indicates that a sudden change in price will significantly affect a person's attitudes and purchase intentions of the product and associated products (Janakiraman, Meyer, & Morales, 2006). Furthermore, the distribution of the sport product in the form of media coverage is positively related to the place wherein the product resides in the consumer's mind (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002). Therefore, in order to actively and successfully communicate with current and potential consumers, an organization must develop a sound brand position or value proposition (Aaker, 1996).

Positioning is not what you do to a product, but what you do to the mind of the stakeholder. Said differently, the consumer's interpretation is the one that affects the brand rather than the person's intention that designed the experience (Fortini-Campbell, 2001). Therefore, it is important for organizations attempting to establish a brand position to understand how key stakeholders view the current brand. According to Aaker (1996), it is highly desirable to invest in tracking. Tracking is an assessment of how customer perceptions have been affected by the brand positioning effort, and can be based on both quantitative and qualitative research (Eriksson, 2008). In sport, however, there is a need to evaluate both the tangible (i.e., revenue) and the intangible (i.e., public perception) indicators in order to assess brand equity (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998). Tangible indicators, particularly in the form of revenue and expenses, are generally easy for a college athletic department to assess. On the other hand, intangible indicators can be just as important to an athletic department's success as a line item on a budget, but are generally more difficult to measure; hence, they are often left uninvestigated. While an athletic department can tell if its teams are suffering from poor fan attendance, it is not always clear why this phenomenon is taking place. This can also be extended to the case of an entire university, and could help explain why freshman applications may be down. It is here that a measure of stakeholder perception can be helpful in an institution's efforts to strengthen their overall brand (Roy et al., 2008; Trail & Chelladurai, 2000).

Despite these important marketing and managerial considerations, Tomasini (2005) suggests reclassification decisions are often made without gauging the support of key stakeholders or considering the substantial changes in marketing strategy. That is, a common perception of many administrators is that reclassification into Division I athletic competition will automatically bring prestige and favorable public perception to a university in the form of the increased exposure, donations, number of student applications, and university growth (Grant et al., 2008; Roy et al., 2008). However, factoring in the ability of athletics to attract potential enrollment and private giving, Tomasini found that donations, freshman applications, and student enrollment did not increase in the three years following reclassification. Similarly, Roy et al. reported a minimal change in event attendance and athletic donations as a result of a football program's reclassification from Division I-FCS to Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). The same study, however, indicated a potential to provide a positive effect on the image of the

university and its academic stature, but noted that further research was required. In general, as mentioned earlier, there is a need for further research surrounding NCAA reclassification.

In all, strategic management literature suggests successful top management decisions factor in the needs of stakeholders as the primary means for discretion (Harrison & Pelletier, 1997; Monkevičienė & Rybakovas, 2003). Further, the perceptions of key stakeholders can greatly influence their behavioral response to organizational phenomena, especially with regard to a fundamental change in culture (Carini, Palich, Livingstone, & Whitehill, 1998). However, research suggests university administrators make strategic decisions, like division reclassification, by looking to other universities and athletic departments and without gauging the perceptions of their important constituents (Cunningham, 2002; Tomasini, 2005). In order to properly understand the relationship between these two key components of reclassification, additional exploration of the phenomenon is required. Thus, beginning with the strategic management decision process and ending with current perceptions of stakeholders, this case study aimed to provide a more complete understanding of the reclassification process. To this end, the following research questions were created to guide the research:

- RQ1: What elements factored into the strategic management decision process to reclassify from a Division II member institution to a Division I (FCS) member institution?
- RQ2: How has the decision affected perceptions of the athletic department and the university's overall image among key stakeholder groups?
- RQ3: Were there significant differences between the perceptions of current students and alumni with respect to the athletic department, the reclassification, and the university as a whole?

Methods

Strategic management decisions and stakeholder perceptions of a university's move from NCAA Division II to Division I were examined through a mixed-methodological case study. Yin (2009) defined case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). In terms of its end-product, Merriam (1998) defined a qualitative case study as an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 27). Further, "By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" (Merriam, 1998, p. 29), and given this study's focus on one institution, a case study was selected as the most appropriate research method.

While Yin (2009) recommended six possible sources of evidence, survey questionnaires and semi-structured in-depth interviews were selected and conducted as the most appropriate sources of evidence for this study. These sources were interpreted using a concurrent triangulation strategy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This approach allowed the researchers to use two different methods in an attempt to confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings within the study. Integration between the two types of data occurred in the interpretation phase. Ultimately, this strategy was implemented to provide a more complete and holistic understanding of a specific NCAA reclassification phenomenon.

Setting

The setting for this study was a medium-sized public university with approximately 12,500 total students located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The target university made the transition from Division II to Division I in 2002 and previously had a strong Division II athletic program, including multiple national championships in football, but has struggled in most sports thus far at the Division I (FCS) level.

Quantitative Methods

Two separate, but similar, questionnaires were administered to two populations with significant stakes in the university's athletic program: undergraduate students ($n=285$) and alumni ($n=4,000$). Students were solicited in undergraduate Sport and Exercise Science (SES) classes, as paper surveys were distributed among interested participants. It is important to note that the majority of students surveyed were not SES majors, as these classes were required for all undergraduates. With the assistance of the university's alumni association, the potential alumni participants were randomly selected and contacted via a mass email solicitation. The email included a brief introduction from the study's lead researcher and a hyperlink to the online survey hosted by Formsite.com. In addition to the initial e-mail invitation, reminder emails were sent two and four weeks later to increase the response rate.

Both sampled groups answered questions measuring: (a) their perceptions of a Division I athletic program, (b) their perceptions of the institution's move to Division I membership, (c) their perceptions of the relationship between the university's academic programs and athletic programs, and (d) their behavioral intentions related to the institution's move to Division I membership. The amount of time between the reclassification and the current study could be a potential limitation with regard to current students' perception of the move. However, during the athletic program's years of on-field struggles, pundits from within the university and the community have suggested the program was better off staying in Division II. Thus, the current students were asked for their perception of the move to see if this opinion resonated among current and perspective students.

Perceptions and behavioral intention items with respect to the athletic department, the move, and the institution were adapted from Roy et al.'s (2008) study of NCAA Division I football reclassification. Specifically, the wording was changed to address an entire athletic department as opposed to just football. In addition, based on the study's suggestion for further research surrounding the relationship between academics and athletics, additional perception items were constructed. Perception was operationally defined as the stakeholders' recognition and interpretation of a given stimuli, in this case attributes associated with the institution, intercollegiate athletics, academics, and division reclassification. Behavioral intention was characterized as the immediate antecedent to behavior, and as a measure of future action with regard to the aforementioned attributes (Ajzen, 2008).

With regard to reliability and validity of the instrument scores, the Cronbach's Alpha score for each measure was interpreted, and collectively, the results suggested that each of the scale scores were internally consistent. In addition, principal components analyses with Promax rotation were conducted to assess the dimensionality of the scale scores, and each scale was determined to be unidimensional as prescribed in the previous study (Roy et al, 2008). The individual scale scores for reliability were reported along with the table reporting means and standard deviations of the responses.

All items pertaining to attitudes toward the athletic program, academic programs, and the institution's move to Division I membership were measured on five-point Likert-type scales ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Because not all survey items were relevant to all groups (e.g., students did not answer questions related to the amount of money they give as alumni), some questions were not included on all surveys. Demographic and other behavioral information related to college athletics were also collected. Descriptive statistics were examined to ensure the soundness of the data, sample means and standard deviations were assessed to gauge perception level, and independent sample *t* tests were conducted to examine any differences in the mean perceptions of the two samples.

Qualitative Methods

The theory of constructionism was used in this study to guide the qualitative component. Constructionism focuses on how individuals construct meaning out of the objects in their surrounding environment (Crotty, 1998). With regard to the current study, the interaction between the object, a Division I (FCS) athletic program, and the participants, key stakeholders, administrators, coaches, and faculty facilitators of the university was of particular interest to the researchers. Since each institution has several unique elements specific to its particular situation and the process occurs rather infrequently, this case study investigation of the reclassification of the chosen school is revelatory and a phenomenological method was used to help explain the institution's division reclassification (Yin, 2009). In the researchers' opinion, much of the existing theory for this particular divisional transition is applied from other divisional transitions, so comparisons were drawn between the current findings and the theory in the literature, factual evidence from the target institution, and conventional conjecture from the field.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary means of data collection. These interviews were used to explore each participant's perceptions of the target university and how they relate to NCAA division reclassification. Once again, the reclassification under investigation occurred nearly eight years previous to the study, and therefore, access to both athletic and university administrators active during the decision making process was extremely limited. With that said, the researchers worked diligently to engage several key current and former administrators. In total, eight in-depth interviews lasting 20-40 minutes each were conducted, and each interview followed an 8-10 question interview guide that changed based on the background of the individual being interviewed. Participants were also given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym, which was used in communicating the results of the study.

The appropriate process for analyzing interview data in a phenomenological case study is through "the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings" (Creswell, 2006, p. 52). Therefore, following transcription, each interview was analyzed by two independent investigators specifically searching for emerging themes. The data were coded using open and axial coding procedures in order to begin the process of category construction (Merriam, 1998). After interpreting and reviewing each interview, the two content evaluators retained statements viewed as potential themes. At this point, the investigators analyzed each interview for a second time and themes were ultimately agreed upon. From there, theory building took place through the linking and manipulating of abstract concepts and the creation of over-arching and parsimonious hypotheses (Merriam, 1998).

Data analysis occurred alongside the interview process so that future interview sessions could be changed to accommodate important new ideas that were not part of the original focus.

This step was important, similarly to ongoing category construction, as it was unknown how the participants would react to the topic. Decisions were continuously made to add new questions to the interviews as new ideas and themes emerged from the participants.

In terms of the validity and reliability of the qualitative portion of this study, member checks, peer examination, and an audit trail were performed. Merriam (1998) describes a member check as a follow up with participants to ensure that the data recorded in their interview was interpreted correctly, and we performed these continuously throughout the interview process. According to Creswell (2006), peer examination or review is an external check of the research process provided by an individual who questions the researcher on methods and interpretations. This role was filled by a peer of the researchers. Lastly, in order for an independent judge to authenticate the findings of a study, a series of notes in the form of an audit trail were formed (Merriam, 1998).

Findings

A total of 558 unique stakeholders began the surveys (342 alumni & 216 students), but the results from 54 participants (46 alumni & 8 students) were removed due to incomplete or missing data. The response rate for current students was 72.9% and 7.4% for alumni, as 69 students declined participation of the in-class data collection process. While the alumni response rate was substantially lower than the student rate, web-based survey methods traditionally result in lower response rate, but allow a researcher to solicit a greater number of potential respondents (Dillman, 2007). An effort to understand the non-responses from the alumni was conducted by the researchers, and it was determined that survey fatigue, email spam blockers, and discontinued email addresses accounted for a sizeable amount of non-responses. As an outcome of increased vigilance in the form of personal and technological filters to keep unwanted and unsolicited e-mails out of an individual's inbox, the mass email protocol utilized in this study may have resulted in an inability to successfully reach all of the potential respondents. This use of a SPAM blocker, junk inbox, or the use of a bogus email address is not only a limitation to the study, but a limitation to web-based survey procedures, in general (Wright, 2005). Regardless, the samples were deemed acceptable as the demographic profiles (Table 1) were representative of the general populations.

Table 1 - *Demographics of Survey Respondents*

| Survey Respondents | Students (n=208) | | Alumni (n=296) | |
|------------------------|------------------|-----|----------------|-----|
| | n | % | n | % |
| Sex | | | | |
| Male | 92 | 44% | 190 | 65% |
| Female | 116 | 56% | 103 | 35% |
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 8 | 4% | 2 | 2% |
| Black | 7 | 3% | 7 | 2% |
| Caucasian/White | 163 | 79% | 260 | 89% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 22 | 11% | 9 | 3% |
| Other | 7 | 3% | 10 | 3% |
| Age | | | | |
| Mean | 21.47 | --- | 49.35 | --- |
| St. Dev. | 3.64 | --- | 15.45 | --- |
| Median | 21 | --- | 52 | --- |
| Range | 18-47 | --- | 23-85 | --- |

All of the interview participants were Caucasian/white; five were male and three were female. As opposed to the key stakeholder groups surveyed, the participants interviewed represented additional stakeholders, administrators, and facilitators that were much more difficult to capture in large numbers. For instance, the interviewees included a former top-level university official (Mr. Jones), a current administrator and former coach for the athletic department (Mr. James), a current Division I coach (Coach Smith), two faculty members who were both formerly members of the board of athletic control (Dr. Phillips & Dr. Lake), a former consultant-type figure responsible for a feasibility study of the proposed move (Mr. Prince), and two former student-athletes that were also current graduate students (Hailey & Rebecca).

Utilizing a case study approach, the quantitative and qualitative findings converged to reveal a more complete understanding of the institution's reclassification to NCAA Division I athletics through the recollection of strategic decisions, perceptions, and behavioral intentions of key stakeholders and administrative facilitators. This union of distinct data types provided both enhanced generalizability and depth to the subject and allowed the researchers to understand both the bigger picture and simple nuances of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Yin, 2009). Overall, with the exception of the strategic decision making, the analysis of the qualitative data for the most part suggested an agreement between the survey questionnaire and in-depth interview results, lending strength to the outcomes of the study. For instance, the perceptions of the relationship between academics and athletics of the surveyed students and alumni supported the general opinions of the faculty and graduate students interviewed. In addition, the behavioral intentions of the surveyed samples aligned with the behavioral intentions of the interviewees.

Eight interviews were deemed sufficient as the nature of the responses and how they related to the quantitative results led the researchers to believe that a saturation point had been reached. Specifically, as data analysis of the interview transcripts progressed, it became apparent that no new information about both the strategic management decisions and the perceptions of the reclassification was emerging (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Strategic Management Decisions

In the case of our target institution, there were several unique factors that played significant roles in the strategic decision to reclassify. Given that Mr. Jones, Mr. James, Dr. Phillips, and Mr. Prince were directly involved with the decision process, these individuals had greater knowledge of the conversations and factors weighed prior to the move. For instance, with regard to the institution's primary motivation for reclassifying, Mr. Jones recounted, "We were hoping to achieve higher donations from alumni, higher enrollment, and improved academic standards." When probed about the reclassification's effect on academics, Mr. Jones added:

We became convinced that it would be real positive for the university's academic reputation, or I should say, I did as well as others... The added exposure helped us attract more students, and by attracting more students we could be more selective, and by being more selective we could help raise our academic standards and take students with higher qualifications.

Dr. Phillips echoed this statement by affirming, "[The former administration] was hoping that we would begin to attract more and better students because there are a number of students who will simply go to [a large Division I institution] because they have a big time football program." However, while Dr. Phillips could not think of an example where this had previously occurred, Mr. Jones specified, "When Northwestern went to the Rose Bowl a number of years ago, their applications tripled and they tripled among students that were qualified to be accepted."

This extension of previous phenomena parallels Cunningham's (2002) analyzer finding, as the university and the athletic department looked at several institutions who benefited from athletic success or who recently transitioned to Division I athletics and applied these results to their unique situation. Particularly, Mr. Jones noted, "We talked to a number of schools and got good information from them about how expensive the transition was. It wasn't just more scholarships that you are required to put up, but also the development of the conference, travel, and facilities."

Along that line, Mr. Prince added that the results of his feasibility study suggested "The biggest internal challenge to the athletic department was a lack of money," and upon providing the decision-makers with the ominous details as to what it would take to reclassify, Mr. Prince was surprised when the group seemed unfazed by the numerous obstacles in their path. He concluded, "Looking back on it now, I have a feeling that the decision was made before they asked me to do the study."

This predetermined fate may have had something to do with the most agreed upon reason for reclassification, the institution's dissatisfaction with its position in Division II. For instance, Mr. Prince stated, "The current state of their Division II conference may have forced their hand." Coach Smith summed it up by saying, "To me, Division II is like the middle class of our economy, and it's being squeezed. I think we are an example of that. Our Division II conference was a great conference, and it no longer exists. I'm not saying Division II athletics isn't important or there isn't a niche for it, but I think it's gotten squeezed with everything that goes on with Division I." All of the participants shared a generally similar point of view regarding the institution's rationale for leaving Division II, as illustrated by some of the following responses:

- Division II was in the process of becoming a lesser conference or lesser association with (fewer) opportunities for students athletes, and the conference that we were a member of

didn't want to go that way, so we were fighting it. In retrospect, had we stayed in Division II we would have been in a world of hurt anyway... We were concerned about that, (and) that was one of the motivating factors, let's get out of Division II, it's going the wrong way, let's go to Division I and see what we can do. (Dr. Phillips)

- I think it's the decision that we had to make as an institution. I was ultimately forced to agree that it was one of those catch-22's for this university, that there wasn't much of a future in remaining in the conference that we were in at Division II. (Dr. Lake)

Interestingly, in addition to the scourge of Division II, the interview participants believed the transition was also due to several different driving forces including financial prosperity, increased exposure, and enhanced academic prestige. For instance, when asked what fuelled the decision to reclassify, Dr. Lake responded, "It was financial, [in] that there was going to be the opportunity, albeit it was going to be 5-7 years down the road, [where] we would be able to be competitive enough to share in the proceeds of the [Division I] men's basketball tournament." Mr. James, who was a coach during the transition and is now an administrator, maintained "There were two driving forces, one was our academic mission and the other was where we sat in the [state's] hierarchy of education. We're at the top tier of institutions, and we wanted to get closer in perception to those institutions around the state." He continued, "Now we are more aligned as an institution, and maybe it's wrong, but athletics is a big part of that perception." Along the same line, while Mr. Prince focused mainly on the athletic department, he interpreted the primary reason for reclassification to be the institution wanting to "be on the same level with other large universities in the state."

Coach Smith added, "I think it was about exposure. When people are talking about college football or basketball or baseball within their jobs or whatever the case may be, I think the exposure to the university is greatly enhanced because of the media, especially if we can be successful." He continued, "I think [being Division I] brings to light the positive things about our university. There are a lot of cases where you look at smaller schools that got a shot in the arm from an enrollment and application standpoint. It helps people take a closer look at the university, and I think that's good." Similarly, Mr. Jones stated, "the thinking was pretty obvious, that this [reclassification] provided a positive way to gain recognition for the campus, and that recognition would help us improve enrollment significantly." He added that prior to the move media research was conducted in the biggest market in the area and a local school with a Division I (FBS) program received twice as much media coverage on a Saturday afternoon following a loss than the target did in an entire year. He concluded, "It all goes back to the fact that just being on the roll on ESPN where your scores are reported dramatically increases the coverage the university could get."

It is important to note that there are many unique factors that could drive the decision-making for each individual reclassification, and the above responses, though somewhat inconsistent between participants, echo previous research on the perceived benefits of reclassification (Grant et al., 2008; Roy et al., 2008; Tomasini, 2005). However, organizations typically error when strategic decisions are made without a strong consideration of the perceptions of key stakeholder groups (Carini et al., 1998; Trail & Chelladurai, 2000). Thus, in line with the primary focus of the study, the following sections provide the stakeholder perception results with regard to the reclassification in order to investigate the relationship between the perceived benefits of administrators and those of current students and alumni.

Perceptions of Athletics and Reclassification

The quantitative findings appear to minimally support any perception change among key stakeholders with respect to Division I athletics (see Table 2). That is, despite the huge expense of reclassifying and the preconceived benefits, the perceptions of Division I athletics appear to be neutral to slightly favorable for the alumni and students surveyed. In addition, there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups with respect to prestige, creating a positive image, and enhancement of school spirit. Of all the questions posed on the survey, the perceived prestige of a Division I athletic program received the most support from students and alumni ($M=2.0$ & $M=2.1$, respectively). Thus, there appears to be a level of inherent value in having a Division I athletic program. Interestingly, with respect to being an important reason for attending the target institution, a stronger negative response was provided by the students ($M=3.5$) suggesting that a Division I athletic program in this case may not create the admissions spike that is perceived.

Table 2 - *Perceptions of Division I Athletics (unidimensional; $\alpha = .819$)*

| Perception | Students M (SD) | Alumni M (SD) |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| A Division I athletic program is more prestigious | 2.1 (0.9) | 2.2 (1.1) |
| A Division I athletic program can create a positive image for a university | 2.3 (0.9) | 2.5 (1.1) |
| A Division I athletic program was an important reason to attend the university | 3.5 (1.2) | NA |
| A Division I athletic program enhances school spirit | 2.7 (1.1) | 2.8 (1.1) |
| A Division I athletic program is a reason for alumni to get more involved with their alma mater | NA | 3.0 (1.1) |

Note. 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

Similar to the perceptions of Division I athletics, the survey results with regard to the target university's role in the reclassification indicated an apathetic to slightly favorable response (Table 3). The move to Division I appeared not to substantially enhance the image of the institution, make the stakeholders more proud, nor improve school spirit. Interestingly, there was a significant difference between alumni and current students with respect to school spirit perceived with the reclassification. In addition, alumni indicated a slight disapproval ($M=3.3$) with any enhancement of one's degree because of the reclassification.

Table 3 - *Perceptions of the Move to Division I (unidimensional; $\alpha = .874$)*

| Perception | Students M (SD) | Alumni M (SD) |
|--|--------------------|------------------|
| The move has enhanced the overall image of the university | 2.5 (0.9) | 2.7 (1.1) |
| The move makes me proud of my university | 2.8 (1.0) | 3.0 (1.2) |
| The move has improved my school spirit* | 2.9 (1.0) | 2.4 (1.1) |
| The move has enhanced my perceived value of my degree from the university. | NA | 3.3 (1.2) |

Note. 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

* Significant at $p < .001$

The in-depth interview responses with respect to the athletic program and its decision to reclassify were also neutral to slightly favorable. Generally, the current coach and administrative participants believed that the position of the athletic department has been enhanced by becoming a Division I institution, with the most significant change being that they are able to successfully recruit a much higher level of athlete without having to jeopardize the academic standards of the university. However, the faculty and student participants did not share a similar viewpoint towards the department nor the reclassification. While Dr. Phillips indicated having marginally improved perceptions of athletics, this was not the case with the other members of these groups. Hailey, a former student-athlete at a large Division I institution, summed up the student opinion, saying, "Being at the Division I level is a cool thing to say, but if you're not competitive and people don't want to come watch you compete, it doesn't really matter what level you're at." Similarly, but with a more hopeful outlook, Dr. Lake stated:

In terms of the actual competition, I don't see much difference; I think we're kind of like Division II plus. I've been at Division I schools that have some of the finest athletic programs in the country and it's night and day, there is no comparison in all facets. And, in fact, I miss that level of competition. (However,) I thought we competed well in football [in 2008], so maybe we are beginning to get those athletes that will allow us to be more competitive with other Division I schools.

Mr. Jones stated a similar positive outlook, yet had this to say about the poor on-field performance:

While things have been slower, [the athletic program] has gotten through the initiation period, so hopefully while it's been a long process, hopefully it will begin to bear stronger fruit. We knew from the start it would be a painful transition. As you can imagine, not everybody in the athletic department was in favor of it.

An additional major issue that plagues athletics at the target institution is poor attendance at athletic events. The participants believed that the target university is missing out on a substantial amount of potential positive public perception, in part because people are not showing up for games. Part of this problem is poor student attendance at athletic events. Rebecca noted, "I just don't feel like (the university) does a good job of communicating athletic events to students... I don't think they make it a big deal, students don't know about it, so it's not known as an athletic university." Mr. James made a similar reference to this situation, stating, "We need

to get the students in there and fired up, because that will bring the community. We have to get one to get the other.”

The quantitative results with respect to NCAA event attendance appear to confirm Rebecca and Mr. James’ opinions. Among the alumni and students surveyed, attendance at the target university’s athletic events was poor (see Table 4). For the school year starting in the fall of 2008, 65% of students surveyed attended less than four NCAA athletic events. For alumni within an hour radius of the campus ($n=182$), only 13% attended four or more NCAA events in the 2008-2009 school year. On the other hand, 39% of the students and 42% of alumni indicated that they attended another University’s NCAA athletic event (Table 5).

Table 4 - *Number of University Athletic Events Attended in Past Year*

| Respondents | Students ($n=208$) | | Alumni ($n=182$) | |
|--------------|-------------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| None | 54 | 26% | 126 | 69% |
| One | 26 | 13% | 17 | 9% |
| Two | 28 | 13% | 10 | 5% |
| Three | 26 | 13% | 5 | 3% |
| Four or more | 74 | 36% | 24 | 13% |

* Alumni responses were limited to individuals that live in the same state of the target institution ($n=182$).

Table 5 - *Attendance at Other University’s Athletic Events within the Past Year*

| Respondents | Students ($n=208$) | | Alumni ($n=296$) | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Have Attended | 82 | 39% | 124 | 42% |
| Have Not Attended | 126 | 61% | 172 | 58% |

Perceptions of the Relationship between Athletics and Academics

The relationship between “big-time” college athletics and academics has been contentious for decades. While several high-profile scandals and vocal antagonists have highlighted the wrongdoings associated with student-athletes, little empirical data exists with respect to key university stakeholders and their perceptions of the relationship between academic prestige and athletic prowess (Simon, 2008). Interestingly, the survey results for this section uncovered the current study’s strongest negative responses as both students and alumni appear not to connect the target institutions academics with their Division I athletic program (see Table 6). While

significant differences between the two groups existed for an improved perception of academics due to athletics, the overall sentiment of the relationship was neutral at best. In addition, the students indicated a neutral to slightly disapproving attitude toward the notion of choosing the institution because of athletics as opposed to academics, and the alumni appeared not to base donations on athletics over academics.

Table 6 - *Perceptions of the Relationship between Academics and Athletics (unidimensional; $\alpha = .713$)*

| Perception | Students M (SD) | Alumni M (SD) |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| A Division I athletic program has improved my perception of the university's academic programs* | 3.2 (1.0) | 3.5 (1.1) |
| The university's overall image is influenced more by its athletic program than its academic programs | 3.4 (1.1) | 3.6 (1.1) |
| My decision to financially support was influenced more by the athletic program than the academic programs | NA | 3.8 (1.2) |
| My decision to attend was influenced more by the athletic program than the academic programs | 3.8 (1.2) | NA |

Note. 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

* Significant at $p < .001$

Once again, the interview participants, for the most part, echoed the students and alumni survey results with regard to their perceptions of the current athletics and academics relationship. For instance, the faculty and student participants believed that there may be cases in which athletic exposure has had a positive effect on academic perceptions, but did not believe that any such trend has occurred at the target institution. The student participants specifically indicated that a Division I athletic program was not a significant contributor in their decisions to attend the university, and that they believed the university was better known for academics than athletics.

Behavioral Intentions

The quantitative behavioral intentions findings resulted in the largest disparity between the students and alumni (Table 7). That is, when asked how the move to Division I would affect future decisions such as target institution event attendance, other institution event attendance, the wearing of university logoed sportswear, and perceived alumni donation, the respondents disagreed to a certain extent on the reclassification's role in their future behaviors. For the most part, it appears that alumni view the reclassification as a less important reason for becoming more involved with the university and its athletic program. Interestingly, of the 296 alumni respondents, 67 (23%) had donated to the athletic department since graduation. Sixty five (22%) of the 296 were former student-athletes, but only 54% (35) of this group had donated to the athletic department.

The qualitative results, specifically with regards to logoed apparel, validate the quantitative findings in that the alumni participants agreed that division reclassification was not

an important reason to become more involved with their former school. For instance, Hailey stated, “I probably wear my alma mater clothing more, but there are tons of prestigious schools that aren’t [Division] I that you can be proud of going to... I don’t think it matters what division you are in relative to whether you will wear the school’s clothing. Students are still going to wear [branded clothing] when they’re on campus.” Similarly, when asked how the reclassification affects her purchase intentions, Rebecca noted, “It’s not even a factor. Being [Division] I doesn’t influence my decision to buy or wear [the target institution’s] clothing.”

Table 7 - *Behavioral Intentions Related to Move to Division I (unidimensional; $\alpha = .860$)*

| Behavioral Intention | Students <i>M (SD)</i> | Alumni <i>M (SD)</i> |
|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| More likely to attend home athletic events* | 2.8 (1.1) | 3.2 (1.3) |
| More likely to attend other universities' athletic events* | 2.8 (1.1) | 3.3 (1.1) |
| More likely to wear university logo items* | 2.4 (1.0) | 2.7 (1.2) |
| Alumni will be more likely to donate as result of move* | 2.6 (0.9) | 3.0 (1.0) |

Note. 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

* Significant at $p < .001$

** Alumni responses were limited to individuals living in the same state as the target institution ($n = 182$)

Discussion

When it comes to intercollegiate athletics and reclassification from Division II to Division I, do the perceptions of key stakeholders equal the perceptions of the strategic decision makers? The perceived benefits of moving to the highest level of competition include increased revenue, exposure, fan support, and admissions; however, previous research has yet to confirm these beliefs (Roy et al, 2008; Tomasini, 2005; Whitmire, 2003). Interestingly, each of these perceptions was stated candidly by the administrative and administrative-related participants as reasoning for the target institutions reclassification, but not confirmed by the stakeholder perception results nearly eight years following the transition. As a result, the findings provide numerous opportunities and threats for the university under investigation and offer athletic and university officials considering similar reclassification substantive findings that may affect their decision. The following sections discuss potential prospects and repercussions for institutions as well as limitations and opportunities for future research.

Opportunities and Threats for Institutions and Athletic Programs

The in-depth interview results discovered underlying strategic management decisions that led to the transition and provide detailed feedback from influential agents on the frontline of the move. This information about the decision-making process leads directly into the first threat for organizations considering reclassification, and that is the difference between perception and

reality. For instance, while the decision-makers sought the perceived benefits noted above for both the athletic department and the institution as a whole, the realities have been quite different. In fact, the expenses for the target athletic department have greatly exceeded revenue including running a \$500,000 deficit between 2005 and 2006, and within a two year span (2004-2006), the department witnessed the exit of 34 administrators and coaches (Mustari, 2006). Interestingly, at the time of the shortfall the target institution had the smallest athletic budget in the conference at \$6.3 million (Mustari, 2006). The largest expense was personnel salaries followed closely by grant-in-aid, but as the football team gradually increased its total number of full-ride scholarships to the Division I (FCS) maximum of 63 by the Fall of 2008 from the Division II maximum of 36, this ranking would surely change. Thus, expenses will continue to rise.

In terms of enrollment, the university saw a slight gain from 2002 to 2005, followed by three straight years of decline before edging up again in the Fall of 2009 (Casey, 2007; 2009). Lastly, with regard to donations to the program, the survey respondents and interview participants agreed that during the current state of the reclassification, donations have not been what was expected, nor was the transition reason enough for donations to increase despite preliminary assertions of increased support.

This is nothing out of the ordinary for reclassifying institutions. As a result of this trend, the NCAA enacted a four-year moratorium for reclassifications into Division I ending in 2011, and has begun to warn organizations about the heavy costs associated with such a move. In a 2007(b) study of reclassifications from 1993-2003, the NCAA explicitly noted that “the additional revenues gained through reclassification to Division I-AA are more than offset by increased expenses, such that, on average, net losses after reclassification increase” (p. 11). As for Division II schools looking to transition to I-AA (FCS), “this financial drain is greater” (p. 11).

Interestingly, despite the poor outcomes of the reclassification thus far, the results of the quantitative analysis suggest that current students and alumni have an apathetic to slightly favorable opinion of the athletic department and its move to Division I athletics. Given the harsh realities of the reclassification noted above, the researchers were somewhat expecting to receive much stronger negative perceptions of the transition. This may suggest two things: (1) the students and alumni are split on their opinion, or (2) these groups ultimately do not care. With an average standard deviation of 1.07, one would think the latter. Regardless, further research is required to determine the difference. With regard to benefits extended to the institution as a whole, these same stakeholders did not perceive any such benefit, did not foresee an increase in applications, and definitely did not see the connection between academic prestige and athletic classification. This is vital information for university administrators looking to boost academic prestige through repositioning intercollegiate athletics.

Another obvious threat to institutions and athletic programs considering reclassifying is the perceived state of Division II athletics. That is, while the grant-in-aid expenses do not equal those of their Division I counterparts, for the most part, the operating and overhead costs do. Yet, Division II sports do not encompass the revenue streams of the highest level, specifically when one factors in revenue generated from the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament. As a result, more and more Division II programs are being forced to make tough strategic decisions similar to those made by the target institution’s administration. For instance, when asked about the decision process to reclassify, Dr. Lake responded, “one of the big discussion points was we didn’t see any financial gain by remaining a [Division] II member in the conference in which we were located, and that the pot of money that got distributed to [Division] II member schools was

actually shrinking, so it was almost like a no-win situation.” As more and more institutions are opting for a piece of the basketball fund, at what point will the current version of Division II athletics become unsustainable?

Additionally, as economic resources for athletic departments in the form of student fees and grant-in-aid are becoming increasingly scarce, some programs are even pursuing reclassification to Division III as opposed to Division II (Hosick, 2009; Peloquin, 2009). This alarming trend has compelled the NCAA to look into the value and efficiency of grant-in-aid at the Division II level. The results of the 2007 study of Division II membership organized by the NCAA and conducted by Hardwick-Day Consultancy, primarily suggested that “a large majority of Division II members receive benefits well worth the investments they make in athletic scholarships” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 30). However, the same report noted that a few of the institutions studied could significantly benefit from adjusting or discontinuing the use of athletic scholarships altogether. Once again, these results point to the uniqueness of every institution and athletic program. However, without empirical evidence suggesting inefficiency of the Division II model, what are these athletic departments basing their decision on to reclassify to Division I? This area is in definite need of further examination.

An alarming threat for athletic departments is the chance to use athletics as a means to build stronger alumni relationships. That is, while most of the quantitative results were middle of the road, the behavioral intention findings for the alumni suggest that the target university’s brand of college sport has a long way to go to in achieving a strong connection with alumni. This section of the questionnaire elicited some of the strongest negative responses. The alumni surveyed were significantly less likely to attend home athletic events and wear university logoed apparel than current students. Also, the alumni perceived fewer donations will be given as a result of the move. This is significant for institutions as alumni charitable contributions are a highly sought-after revenue stream for athletic departments (Clotfelter, 2001; Sigelman & Carter, 1979).

Along the same line, no other department on a college campus generates as much public attention and media coverage as the athletic department (Duderstadt, 2000). Thus, a reclassification to Division I presents an excellent opportunity for institutions looking to create a buzz or build awareness of the program’s brand. There is no denying that the contemporary sport marketplace is flooded, and organizations that are able to evoke energy and emotion of what is cool, new, or different at the moment often stand out from the crowd. Kerner and Pressman (2007) stated, “Buzzworthy products almost always cut through the clutter” (p. 81), and the transition to Division I athletics is a notoriously hot-button, emotionally-driven subject in and around college campuses. As a result, regardless of one’s beliefs about the reclassification, the athletic department and university are in the crosshairs and the resulting buzz should be viewed as an opportunity. With regard to the current institution, several interview participants, including a few that were strongly in favor of the transition, felt the athletic program has failed to communicate effectively with stakeholders, namely students. Specifically, the participants mentioned that the program needs to energize its fan base and “make it a bigger deal.” Therefore, athletic programs should look to harness and capitalize on this poignant change in culture and vision by creating a buzz around its teams and its brand.

Correspondingly, an important reason to capitalize on the initial buzz of reclassification is that poor on-field performance most often directly follows the transition. On occasion, a program, such as North Dakota State men’s basketball (2008-2009), can turn lower-level success

into prosperity at the higher division, but more often than not the competition at the higher level proves to be too much for the reclassifying organization. This is not completely unexpected, but it is definitely something for which an athletic program should consider, especially if the program has had a strong tradition of success at the lower division. In general, despite research that suggests athletic success provides substantial benefit to an institution, decision makers should heavily weigh the cost of simply being mediocre at the highest level.

Lastly, the alumni and current students examined branded the target institution primarily on its academic qualities, not its athletics. That is, despite a very public reclassification from a Division II power to a Division I doormat, these stakeholders do not perceive a difference in the current institution's brand. Previous research has suggested a unique and unnerving relationship between big-time college athletics and their respective academic counterparts (Roy et al, 2008; Simon, 2008; Sperber, 2000). Oftentimes, despite the academic-focused mission of a university, the clout and publicity of an athletic department may overshadow what occurs in the classroom. More interestingly, previous stakeholder research has shown a positive relationship between on-field performance and the perceived academic prowess of a university (Sperber, 2000). Due to this phenomenon, universities and administrators hope to capitalize on athletic success as a vehicle to promote academic superiority. In this case, however, both the students and alumni perceptions of the target university were not altered by the recent reclassification or by the poor on-field performance of the athletic teams. In fact, the suggestion of a relationship between athletics and academics elicited some of the strongest negative results of the entire survey. Thus, going forward, university officials looking to utilize athletic reclassification as a means of brand transformation for the university should cautiously assess the current brand image among key stakeholders. Brand management is all about an individual's connections with the product and how the product is positioned within the consumer's mind (Ries & Trout, 2001). Therefore, in order to receive the results one is looking for, a thorough understanding of the target's psychological make-up before and after the reclassification is recommended. Further research involving the relationship between athletic reclassification and the perceptions of academic quality is advised.

In conclusion, the current study's results appear to confirm previous research that suggests success at the highest level of college athletics is required to receive transitive benefits to the entire institution (Goff, 2000; Roy et al., 2008; Tomasini, 2005). That is, it is not simply enough to be a member of Division I. A program needs to be successful at this level, though without the opportunity to compete, there is no chance of winning. Regardless, it is important to note that the current reclassification is evolving and the situation is specific to the target university. However, as noted in the review of literature, the strategic management decisions made in athletic departments are often reactionary or guided by the observation of similar institutions and athletic departments. The distinct factors and circumstances unique to each program could potentially result in completely different results. Thus, if the strategic management decisions are truly externally-focused and opportunity-driven, the perceptions and attitudes of key stakeholders, such as current students and alumni, should be extremely important to organizations considering reclassification. Through research seeking to understand the beliefs, cultures, and behaviors of these important groups, athletic departments and institutions will garner vital information needed to make efficient, well-guided strategic decisions.

Limitations & Future Research

Despite providing both conclusive and in-depth data for analysis, a limitation to this study was the case study nature of the investigation. While the stakeholders represented a somewhat diversified population of students, alumni, and administrators, only one institution's transition to Division I (FCS) was examined. Thus, the study's findings are not completely generalizable, and the results should be tempered accordingly. Also, the study's stakeholders were limited to current students and alumni and neglected the general population surrounding the university. While the city most closely associated with the institution is not a major metropolitan area, the perceptions of this population would increase the quality of the results. Lastly, the response rate among alumni was low, and while an investigation into the response rates was implemented, a lack of information was provided by the administrator of the listserv. Thus, it was difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for the low response rate.

In terms of future research, an examination of the local population would be an advisable extension of this study. In addition, the relationship between on-field performance, stakeholder perceptions, and reclassification would be an intriguing line of research. Interestingly, at the target institution, a club-level hockey team has been extremely successful in terms of on-ice performance, attendance, and student support despite zero affiliation with the NCAA. An intriguing augmentation of the current study would poll similar stakeholders and include popular non-traditional alternatives to NCAA sport. These results may provide administrators with a better understanding of their competitors in the reclassification process. In general, the transition process is an extremely expensive strategic decision that requires further examination. Too often, university and athletic administrators are wooed by the possibilities of big-time college athletics, but fail to consider the repercussions felt by their key stakeholders. Thus, future research in this area would be beneficial.

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