

CONFRONTING THE ARMS RACE: CONFERENCE COMMISSIONER PERSPECTIVES ON SPENDING WITHIN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

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The presence of intercollegiate athletics within the academe is founded upon the belief that athletic competition should facilitate a holistic education difficult to replicate through any other educational opportunity (Brand, 2006; National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2010; Rader, 1999). The competitive nature of athletics and the lure of commercial enticements, however, have led to disturbing patterns of abuse that threaten the sanctity of college sport (Dadigan, 2010; Splitt, 2009; Upton, 2011). These patterns are grounded in an urge to win at all costs and are often accompanied by institutional indifference, presidential neglect, and supreme value placed on commercial interests (Knight Commission, 1993; Peloquin, 2010). These institutional actions and the corresponding national consequences of systemic deficit spending (Dadigan, 2010; Knight Commission, 2010; Fulks, 2010) have been termed an arms race of expenditures within intercollegiate athletics (DeBarros, et. al., 2009; Knight Com-

mission, 2010; Luebchow, 2008; Orzag & Israel, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of a unique and powerful player in the arms race—the conference commissioner—in order to supplement current literature and gain a unique understanding of spending within intercollegiate athletics. This study is founded on a review of literature including an overview of the arms race phenomenon, financial implications of the arms race, and the important role of a conference commissioner. Each of these foundational areas of inquiry will be examined throughout the following pages.

THE ARMS RACE OF EXPENDITURES IN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

Reformation has been a topic of inquiry from the beginning of athletics within the academe (Rader, 1999). These literary pursuits have primarily been motivated by an effort to preserve the foundational principles of athletic edu-

cation from a threat of commercialism (Benford, 2007; Budig 2007; Kilborne, 1994; Knight Commission, 2001, 2010; Lapchick, 2006; Sack, 2009). The issues that athletic organizers grappled with in the early days of intercollegiate athletic competition highlight the beginning of what has become an arms race as institutions pushed the envelope in order to gain a competitive advantage (Rader, 1999; Watterson 2000). Responding to the ever-present lure of competition, reformation literature has examined possible solutions (Knight Commission, 1993, 2001, 2009, 2010; Weaver, 2011), and justifications (Brand, 2006), for the amount of money being poured into collegiate athletics (Fulks, 2010; Upton, 2011).

Reformers have pointed to continually rising spending (Fulks, 2010; Orzag & Israel, 2009) as a threat that could destroy the world of contemporary intercollegiate athletics (Clopton, 2008; Knight Commission, 2010; Lawrence, 2009; Sack, 2009). This view of increased spending as an undermining trend is what has become known as the arms race of expenditures that when used in reference to college sport, represents a phenomenon wherein athletic administrators outbid one another in spending in an effort to stockpile "arms" (Knight Commission, 2001, 2009, 2010; "Sports arms race unjustified," 2003; Suggs, 2001). It is a term that has been appropriated from the cold war era where arms, specifically nuclear bombs, were stockpiled by the USA and Soviet Union in an effort to become the most powerful nation (Trueman, 2000).

Today, *the arms race* has become a generalized term denoting extravagant resource accumulation in an attempt to outdo an opponent (Murdock, 2007). It has been applied to college athletics as administrators stockpile by building bigger facilities (Frei, 2011; Knight Commission, 2001; 2009); paying coaches exorbitant salaries (Budig, 2007); and/or by recruiting more athletes than the available scholarships or legal roster spots (Guilbeau, 2011). Each of these actions are undertaken in order to gain a competitive advantage, especially in football and men's basketball. The arms race was articulately defined by Robert Frank in 2004. He explained the belief that a school's odds of having a winning program will increase if they outspend their rivals. This assessment, however, is shared by other schools, and "the gains from bidding higher turn out to be self-canceling when everyone does it. The result is often an expenditure arms race with no apparent limit" (p. 10). This spending—and often unnecessary stockpiling of resources, is the root of many reform concerns in collegiate athletics.

THE KNIGHT COMMISSION PRESIDENTIAL STUDY

A growing body of reform literature has pointed toward the University President as the most probable agent of change in the intercollegiate athletics crisis (Knight Commission, 1993, 2001, 2010). In an effort to address reform ideas with this population, the Knight Commission organized a national study which facilitated quantitative telephone

interviews with 95 FBS University presidents and follow-up qualitative telephone interviews with 22 from the original sample. The interviewed presidents strongly agreed there is a need for change. They voiced certainty in the lack of sustainability of the current model, and called for increased fiscal transparency (Knight Commission, 2009). Despite these vocal assertions of the broken intercollegiate financial model and a traditional belief in the power of these stakeholders, a majority of presidents voiced feelings of powerlessness or fear relative to acting as an agent of change. Particularly telling, one university president mentioned,

The real power doesn't lie with the presidents; presidents have lost their jobs over athletics. Presidents and chancellors are afraid to rock the boat with boards, benefactors, and political supporters who want to win, so they turn their focus elsewhere (Knight Commission, 2009, p. 16).

As a result of this fear, presidential authority in enacting change has been limited. The findings within the Knight Commission presidential study provide a solid foundation upon which this study has been framed. While the university presidents felt imminent pressure to enact change, they voiced limited control. This study, therefore, seeks to address another powerful stakeholder in the college sport sphere of influence—the conference commissioner.

THE CONFERENCE COMMISSIONER

Because a large portion of an athletic department's income comes from shared conference revenues, it would seem logical that a commissioner would be an integral player in the arms race literature. "Conference commissioners wield much of the power in college sports, negotiating television contracts and representing their leagues on influential NCAA committees" ("The 10 most powerful people," 2007, ¶6). This leadership role is increasingly important as researchers have demonstrated that now, more than ever, the arms race is having a powerful effect across every major Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) conference. The FBS is made up of 11 conferences and 120 member institutions ("BCS explained," 2010). All members of the FBS are members of the BCS, but only six of the conferences are granted automatic qualification to the lucrative major bowl games ("BCS explained," 2010; Hanna & Brunno, 2009). This BCS automatic-qualifying status has further subdivided the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision as automatic qualifying (AQ) conferences are generally in a much stronger financial position than their non-automatic qualifying (Non-AQ) conference brothers and sisters. BCS Payouts in 2011, for example, included an average of \$24.2 million payout per AQ conference and a record average of \$4.94 million per non-AQ conference (Smith, 2011, ¶4). Because of these differences, commissioner respondents are categorized as FBS AQ and Non-AQ throughout this inquiry.

Research has demonstrated that even though AQ schools are in a better financial position, than any other NCAA division, all institutions are feeling the effects of the arms race (Berkowitz, 2011; Dadigan, 2010; Frie, 2011; Knight Commission, 2009, 2010). Today, these effects range from sport cuts (Ridpath, Yiamouyiannis, Lawrence, & Galles, 2008; Schlabach, 2009), to conference realignments (Peloquin, 2010), to spiraling coaches and athletic director salaries (Budig, 2007), to accusations of cheating becoming more prominent (Benford, 2007). Conference commissioners are some of the most powerful people in collegiate athletics (Quarterman, 1994; "The 10 most powerful people," 2007), and with the literature pointing to an eventual collapse of the current system of collegiate athletics (Dadigan, 2010; Frie, 2011; Knight Commission, 2009, 2010; Splitt, 2007; "Sports arms race," 2003; Suggs, 2001), the insights of these influential administrators will facilitate a better understanding of the arms race that may help to curtail the rapid increases in intercollegiate athletic spending.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Institutional theory suggests that organizations within a certain group (e.g. a conference) tend to seek approval from other parties within their organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Washington & Patterson, 2011). Because of this, consistent behaviors, methods, and organizational practices often exist among establishments within the same

institutional circles, and these organizations are influenced by the actions and philosophies of one another (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Haunschild & Miner, 1997; Scott & Meyer, 1994, Washington & Patterson, 2011). Over time, these organizations become more and more similar to those within their sphere of influence. This progressive mirroring has been labeled institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Washington & Patterson, 2011).

The development and analysis of this study was guided by institutional theory as the researchers examined whether the conferences, and by extension, the commissioner, can hold the position of dominant organization in college athletics. This stems from the notion that athletic administrators at the individual member institutions within intercollegiate athletic conferences possess an aspiration to be similar to the other member schools in their conferences and seek to follow trends that those other schools are setting. Thelin (1996) demonstrates why member schools may feel this aspiration.

The conference is the crucial unit in shaping and regulating intercollegiate athletics because it can have more impact on shaping athletic policies than the NCAA...(and) is the locus where a small group of institutions in the voluntary association agree to work together, to compete while showing some sign of mutual respect and comparable academic standards. (p 129)

This statement demonstrates how conferences are indeed governed by the principles of institutional theory.

The arms race of expenditures reflects how institutional theory operates, as schools seek to mirror one another by increasing their spending. So, institutional theory clearly supports the arms race as it has progressed, but it may also hold the promise of unraveling the arms race in the future if a league of like-minded individuals emerges as active change agents (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Because conferences create a sphere of influence with their member schools, the conference commissioner holds an important managerial role in effecting change. They are responsible for not only managing the conference, but are responsible for managing the other managers within the conference (Quarterman, 1994). As Quarterman (1994) states, "when commissioners are classified by scope of responsibilities, they are considered general managers, meaning they are responsible for all of the functional areas and functional managers of the conference" (p. 130). Because a fundamental role of a conference is to "formulate and enforce rules and to control expenses" (Quarterman, 1994, p. 129), the Commissioners can play a vital role in setting a spending standard that all the member institutions would follow according to institutional theory.

Institutional theory was applied to a governing body, setting a spending standard through the study *Sport Canada*, where an organization was able to enact change across its 36 national-level sports by using isomorphic pressure (Slack & Hinings, 1994). As *Sport Canada* encouraged its National Sport Or-

ganizations to be more professional and bureaucratic, the differences across the 36 organizations declined as those organizations became more similar through the shared practices (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Similarly, this study will specifically explore the role that conference commissioners, as managers, could hold in setting a standard and facilitating institutional isomorphic behavior among schools to uphold the standard. To this end, the following research questions were posed:

- RQ1—How do conference leaders perceive current resource allocation decisions in intercollegiate athletics?
- RQ2—How do conference leaders perceive the ideas and prohibitions, as outlined and adapted from the Knight Commission (2009) study, that have been suggested to curtail the arms race of expenditures?
- RQ3—How conference leaders envision their role in the effort to change spending practices within college athletics?
- RQ4—What suggestions do conference leaders hold that may influence the future of intercollegiate athletic expenditures?

METHOD

The research questions within this inquiry were addressed through survey methodology as this method is advantageous in accessing specific difficult-to-reach populations (Reips, 2002). Utiliz-

ing a survey facilitated ease of access, voluntary participation, and avoidance of time constraints. Because this criteria was ideal for the busy target population, this method was deemed most appropriate.

Participants

Division I FBS conference leaders comprised the sample for this study. Division I FBS conferences were selected because the arms race of expenditures is fueled by this division (Knight Commission, 2010; Peloquin, 2010). The commercial enticements driving Division I FBS schools to out-bid one another in hopes of gaining a competitive advantage on the field and in receipts is not nearly as prevalent at the Division I FCS, Division I, II or III level (Knight Commission, 2009). Thus, only the conference commissioners, associate, and assistant commissioners with direct involvement in budgetary leadership within the eleven Division I FBS conferences were invited to participate in the study.

Instrument

In order to examine the conference commissioners' perceptions, a thorough review of literature surrounding the arms race was conducted in order to develop an appropriate instrument. Through this research, the 2009 Knight Commission Presidential Survey (see Appendix A) was deemed the most appropriate framework to employ because it specifically addressed the issues relevant in this research. This survey had

been successfully administered to a large sample of 119 university presidents, and the results are widely cited and accepted (Knight Commission, 2009). The Knight Commission was contacted in order to gain permission to utilize and adapt the survey, and permission and feedback was attained. In order to tailor the survey to the target population of conference commissioners, slight changes in wording were made and relevant questions were added and subtracted from the original survey.

Instrument construct validity was addressed through consultation with a panel of experts. This panel that reviewed the content included four professors, a Knight Commission representative with experience utilizing the initial survey, and two senior-level intercollegiate athletic administrators. After several rounds of modification, unanimous support by the panel was attained and content was deemed appropriate providing support for the instrument's validity. The final instrument was comprised of 19 questions including the following five subsections:

- 1) Demographic information
- 2) Sustainability of intercollegiate athletics
- 3) Perspectives on proposed policy changes
- 4) Power and priorities of the conference
- 5) Benefits of intercollegiate athletics

The majority of instrument questions utilized a five point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five

(strongly agree). Following most questions, there was an opportunity for the commissioners to leave comments to supplement the quantitative response. Two open-ended questions also allowed commissioners the opportunity to expound on their thoughts about the role of conferences in the arms race and any efforts their conference had taken to reduce expenditures of their member institutions.

Data Collection

The survey was launched online through zoomerang.com and distributed via email to the eleven Division I-FBS conference commissioners and their senior executive teams including associate and assistant commissioners with direct involvement in budgetary leadership. This population included between four and seven individual email invitations sent to each conference for a total distribution of 65 valid email contacts gleaned from the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics Directory, and directly from the conference websites. The final number of respondents was $n = 25$, for a 38.5% response rate with the majority ($n=18$) from BCS AQ conferences including four BCS AQ conference commissioners, seventeen associate commissioners (BCS AQ $n=11$), and four assistant commissioners (BCS AQ $n=3$). The survey was administered in an anonymous response mechanism so the commissioners would not have to be concerned with potential backlash or retribution from their colleagues (Splitt, 2007). While this ano-

nymity prevented specific knowledge of conference representation in the sample, email exchanges initiated by respondents confirmed that at least nine of the eleven conferences were represented.

Design and Analysis

Quantitative data based on survey responses was analyzed through Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Results were tabulated and descriptive statistics were calculated through Excel. Additionally, a One-way ANOVA was conducted to analyze variance between the BCS Automatic Qualifying (AQ) Conference commissioner respondents and BCS Non-Automatic Qualifying (non-AQ) conference commissioner respondents. The Levene's Test for Equality of Variance was used when comparing the sample means within the related statistical procedures utilizing an alternative "equal variances not assumed" format. Because of the small sample size and high likelihood for Type I errors within analysis of variance, a Cohen's d was calculated for each significant finding and each analysis garnered an effect size of greater than .80 providing support for the statistical results. Open-ended results were not statistically analyzed or coded due to the limited number of responses within the small population of targeted respondents; however, responses that represent rich sources of data are included within the discussion section to provide an additional layer of depth to the statistical findings.

RESULTS

Sustainability of Intercollegiate Athletics

When conference leaders were asked about issues of sustainability and concern related to the arms race of expenditures in intercollegiate athletics, there was a wide range of responses leading to an overall mean of 3.52 with a standard deviation of 1.0. Respondents generally agreed (60%, $n=15$) that the arms race is having a negative impact on the institutions in their conference with significant differences [$F(23) = 4.596$, $p < .05$] revealing heavier negative pressures felt by schools that do not receive an automatic bid to a BCS bowl ($M=4.33$, $SD=0.516$) than the automatic qualifiers ($M=3.26$, $SD=0.99$).

This feeling greater pressure felt by the non-AQ schools was also evident in the responses related to who should be

concerned about the arms race. Non-AQ schools believed athletic directors should be very concerned with all non-AQ respondents marking strongly agree or agree ($M=4.83$, $SD=0.41$). This sentiment was echoed by the AQ commissioners, but to a lesser extent ($M=4.26$, $SD=0.56$). Overall, the commissioners agreed the arms race to be of most concern to athletic directors ($M=4.40$, $SD, 0.58$), followed closely by university presidents, conference commissioners, the NCAA, and the faculty. See Table 1 for a complete listing of statistics.

The economic conditions appear to be affecting every conference and their institutions. The leaders resoundingly reported the effects with 68% ($n=17$) strongly agreeing and 24% ($n=6$) agreeing that the economic conditions are impacting the institutions in their conference. Non-AQ commissioners unanimously marked strongly agree ($M=5.0$,

Table 1
*Commissioner Responses to the Question
"The Arms Race for Expenditure is a concern for:"*

Constituency	Cumulative		BCA AQ Commissioners		BCA Non-AQ Commissioners		F	P	Mean Difference
	M	SD	M	SE	M	SE			
Athletic Director	4.40	0.58	4.26	0.56	4.83	0.41	5.23	0.032	0.57
University Presidents	4.20	0.71	4.05	0.71	4.67	0.52	3.85	0.062	0.62
Conference Commissioner	3.92	0.91	3.79	0.79	4.33	1.21	1.68	0.208	0.54
The NCAA	3.68	1.07	3.68	0.82	3.67	1.75	0.00	0.973	0.02
Faculty	3.48	0.99	3.84	0.90	3.83	1.33	0.00	0.985	0.01

Note: The scale ranged from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5); $N=25$; $*p<.05$

SD=0), and AQ commissioners were slightly less concerned with a mean of 4.47 and standard deviation of 0.696.

Related to these economic concerns, conference leaders were asked in the survey whether they felt athletics operations are sustainable in their current form. Conference leaders varied in their responses garnering a mean and mode of three-neutral, with a moderate standard deviation of .8819. Just under one third (n=8, 32%) did not believe athletic operations are sustainable in their current form. Ten (40%) were neutral, six

(24%) believed athletic operations are sustainable, and one (4%) strongly believed athletic operations are sustainable. There was not a significant difference between AQ and non-AQ conference leaders—in fact the two populations shared the same mean.

Variance in response was also existent in the perceptions about the amount head football and basketball coaches are paid. The majority of respondents (48%, n=12) felt the total compensation to be excessive, while 24% (n=6) were neutral, and 24% (n=7) did not believe the com-

Table 2
Cumulative Conference Commissioner Responses to Potential Policy Change

Policy Change	M	SD
Sport-specific Personnel Reduction <i>Reducing the number of sport specific personnel other than coaches or academic support</i>	3.56	1.12
Revenue Coach Reduction <i>Reducing the number of coaches per sport for revenue producing sports</i>	3.04	1.02
BCS Revenue Distribution <i>Changing the BCS revenue distribution policies</i>	2.96	1.40
NCAA Basketball Revenue Distribution <i>Changing NCAA basketball revenue distribution policies</i>	2.67	1.24
Federal Salary Legislation <i>Seeking changes to federal legislation to allow some level of control on coaching staff salaries</i>	2.67	1.24
Non-Revenue Contest Reduction <i>Reducing the number of contests for nonrevenue producing sports</i>	2.44	1.04
Nonrevenue Coach Reduction <i>Reducing the number of coaches per sport for nonrevenue producing sports</i>	2.44	0.92
Conference Revenue Distribution <i>Changing conference revenue distribution policies</i>	2.38	1.01
Revenue Scholarship Reduction <i>Reducing the number of or total expenditures on scholarships for revenue producing sports</i>	2.32	0.95
Nonrevenue Scholarship Reduction <i>Reducing the number of or total expenditures on scholarships for nonrevenue producing sports</i>	2.17	0.92
Revenue Contest Reduction <i>Reducing the number of contests for revenue producing sports</i>	1.96	0.79

Note: The scale ranged from strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)

pensation to be excessive. Again, there was agreement between AQ and non-AQ conference commissioners with both holding means of 3.2 with standard deviations of 1.032 and .983, respectively.

Conference Commissioner Perspectives to Policy Change Proposals

Utilizing the suggestions of policy changes from the Knight Commission Presidential Survey that could impact revenues and expenses, conference leaders were asked to indicate their level of agreement with potential policy changes. The cumulative responses indicate no policies with mean significantly greater than 3.0 (neutral), indicating a lack of belief that any of the policy changes might be effective. There were, in fact, only two policy change sugges-

tions with cumulative means over 3.0 (see Table 2). Fifty-six percent (n=14) agreed or strongly agreed that reducing the number of sport specific personnel other than coaches or academic support (e.g. the director of football recruiting or the director of basketball operations) would be an effective policy change that could reduce departmental expenses. This policy change garnered a mean of 3.56, however the standard deviation reflected the variance in responses (SD =1.12). The only other policy change with a cumulative mean of over 3.0 was a potential reduction in the number of coaches per sport for revenue producing sports (M=3.04; SD=1.02).

For the most part, BCS AQ and Non-AQ conference commissioners agreed on the potential policy changes (see Table 3), however one significant difference appeared with nearly two full

Table 3
BCS Automatic Qualifier vs. BCS Non-Automatic Qualifier Conference Commissioner Response to Potential Policy Change

Potential Policy Change	BCS AQ Commissioners		BCS Non-AQ Commissioners		F	p	Mean Difference
	M	SD	M	SD			
Sport-specific Personnel Reduction	3.53	1.17	3.67	1.03	0.07	0.796	0.14
Revenue Coach Reduction	3.00	1.00	3.17	1.17	0.12	0.735	0.17
Non-Revenue Contest Reduction	2.68	1.96	2.66	1.03	0.36	0.553	0.02
Nonrevenue coach Reduction	2.58	1.02	2.00	0.00	1.89	0.183	0.58
NCAA Basketball Revenue Distribution	2.58	1.07	2.67	1.21	0.03	0.867	0.09
BCS Revenue Distribution*	2.53	1.26	4.33	0.82	10.68	0.003	1.80
Federal Salary Legislation	2.48	1.22	3.40	1.14	2.34	0.132	0.92
Conference Revenue distribution	2.42	1.07	2.20	0.84	0.18	0.674	0.22
Revenue Scholarship Reduction	2.31	1.06	2.33	0.52	0.00	0.969	0.02
Nonrevenue Scholarship Reduction	2.17	1.04	2.17	0.41	0.00	1.000	0.00
Revenue Contest Reduction	1.89	0.74	2.16	0.98	0.53	0.474	0.27

Note: The scale ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). *p <.01;

points of separation between the two populations. Commissioners from the conferences without an automatic bid to a BCS bowl strongly agreed ($M=4.33$, $SD=.82$) that a change in the BCS revenue distribution policies would impact the revenues and expenses and perhaps make a positive impact on the arms race. BCS AQ commissioners generally did not feel the same way, with a mean resting between disagree and neutral at 2.53 ($SD=1.26$).

Conference Commissioner Power and Priorities

The study respondents were asked to reply to questions about their top priorities and feelings of power relative to the curtailment of the arms race of expenditures. Relative to a commissioner's top priority, the vast majority of res-

pondents agreed (40%, $n=10$) or strongly agreed (44%, $n=11$) that the facilitation of educational experiences was their top priority. This priority received the top ranking with a mean of 4.20 and standard deviation of 0.91 (see Table 4). With a much more varied response, the priority of profit maximization averaged 3.44 with a large standard deviation of 1.23 garnered from between two (strongly disagree) and nine (agree) responses in each response category. While not significant at the $p < .05$ level, there were large mean differences between the AQ and Non-AQ commissioners (see Table 5) with Non-AQ emphasizing their top priority of profit maximization ($M=4.17$, $SD=0.75$), and AQ commissioners more strongly emphasizing their role in facilitating an educational experience ($M=4.37$, $SD=0.75$).

Table 4
BCS Automatic Qualifier vs. BCS Non-Automatic Qualifier Commissioner Perspectives of Power and Priorities

Question	BCS AQ Commissioners		BCS Non-AQ Commissioners		F	p	Mean Difference
	M	SD	M	SD			
My top priority is							
Profit Maximization	3.21	1.27	4.17	0.75	2.92	0.102	0.96
To Facilitate Educational Experience	4.37	0.76	3.67	1.21	12.96	0.100	0.70
As a conference leader,							
I have the power to curb the arms race*	2.42	0.77	1.50	0.84	5.06	0.035	0.92
If FBS conference leaders united,							
We would have the power to curb the arms race	2.68	1.00	2.83	1.47	0.21	0.653	0.15

Note: The scale ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)
N = 25; * $p < .05$

In an effort to gauge the level of power that the commissioners felt they had relative to the curtailment of the arms race of expenditures, they were asked whether they, as a conference leader, had the power to curb the arms race. Only one leader (4%) responded positively with an “agree”. The mean response was 2.20 (SD=0.87) with the median “disagree” and mode “neutral” and “disagree” each with nine or 36% of the sample population (see Table 4). Six respondents marked “strongly disagree” denoting feelings of a complete incapacity to influence the trend of

rapidly increasing expenses. While both AQ and non-AQ commissioners shared feelings of powerlessness, non-AQ respondents felt significantly less power with a mean of 1.50 (SD=0.84), nearly a full point below the AQ respondents (see Table 5). A follow-up question assessed the degree to which the respondents agreed to the statement “if FBS conference leaders united, we would have the power to curb the arms race”. The response was also below the neutral point (M=2.72), with an increase in variance (SD=1.10).

Table 5
Cumulative Conference Commissioner Intercollegiate Athletic Benefit Beliefs

BENEFIT	M	SD
Enhancing School Spirit <i>Enhancing school spirit and campus life</i>	4.56	0.58
Gaining National Publicity <i>Gaining national publicity and media attention</i>	4.48	0.59
Generating Donations <i>Generating higher levels of giving for uses outside of athletics</i>	4.36	0.70
Improving Institutional Reputation <i>Improving the overall reputation of the institution</i>	4.32	0.63
Attracting More Students <i>Attracting greater number of prospective students</i>	4.28	0.54
Providing Opportunities <i>Providing opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged students</i>	4.00	0.82
Providing Holistic Education <i>Providing a holistic education for student athletes</i>	3.84	0.85
Attracting Quality Students <i>Attracting higher quality students</i>	3.80	0.76
Generating Revenue <i>Generating additional revenue for uses outside of athletics</i>	3.68	0.85
Raising Institutional Profile <i>Raising the profile of the institution among elected officials</i>	3.68	0.75

Note: The scale ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)
N=25

Benefits of Intercollegiate Athletics

Conference commissioners were given a list of benefits of housing competitive sport within an educational institution often cited in the literature (Knight Commission, 2009). Respondents were asked whether they believed the schools within their conferences realized the benefits. Cumulative results are available in Table 5. Results revealed six of the ten listed benefits to hold a mean of 4.0 (agree) or above, and the other four holding means above 3.68, between neutral and agree. Most highly ranked benefits included enhancing school spirit and campus life ($M=4.56$, $SD=0.58$), gaining national publicity and media attention ($M=4.48$, $SD=0.59$), generating higher levels of giving for uses outside of athletics ($M=4.36$, $SD=0.70$),

and improving the overall reputation of the institution ($M=4.32$, $SD=0.63$).

Commissioners in the BCS Automatic Qualifying conferences varied significantly from non-AQ conference commissioners on three benefits. BCS AQ commissioners believed holistic educational elements to be significantly more beneficial in their member institutions than the non-AQ commissioners with means varying by just under one point ($M=4.05$, $SD=0.71$ vs. $M=3.17$, $SD=0.98$). Conversely, BCS Non-Automatic Qualifying institutions ranked two benefits significantly higher than the BCS AQ commissioners. Their responses indicated a belief that generating higher levels of giving from alumni and friends for uses outside of athletics ($M=4.83$, $SD=0.41$) and attracting a greater number of prospective students ($M=4.67$,

Table 6
BCS Automatic Qualifier vs. BCS Non-Automatic Qualifier Conference Commissioner Intercollegiate Athletic Benefit

Benefit	BCS AQ Commissioners		BCS Non-Commissioners		F	p	Mean Difference
	M	SD	M	SD			
Enhancing School Spirit	4.53	0.61	4.67	0.52	0.23	0.635	0.14
Gaining National Publicity	4.42	0.61	4.67	0.52	0.47	0.499	0.25
Improving Institutional Reputation	4.26	0.65	4.50	0.55	0.76	0.392	0.24
Generating Donations*	4.21	0.71	4.83	0.41	4.32	0.049	0.62
Attracting More Students*	4.16	0.50	4.67	0.52	5.51	0.029	0.51
Providing Opportunities	4.11	0.81	3.67	0.82	1.45	0.243	0.44
Providing Holistic Education*	4.05	0.71	3.17	0.98	5.04	0.036	0.88
Attracting quality Students	3.89	0.74	3.50	0.84	1.21	0.284	0.39
Generating Revenue	3.79	0.71	3.33	1.21	1.06	0.316	0.46
Raising Institutional Profile	3.63	0.68	3.83	0.98	0.43	0.518	0.20

Note: The scale ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5); $p < .05$; $N=25$

SD=0.52) were significantly more beneficial than the leaders in the BCS AQ schools with mean differences of 0.62 and 0.51, respectively. Refer to Table 6 for a breakdown of all AQ and Non-AQ benefit statistics.

DISCUSSION

Institutional theory posits that organizations within a certain group (e.g. a conference) are influenced by the actions and philosophies of one another. Because of this, organization within a sphere of influence often share consistent behaviors, methods, and organizational practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Haunschild & Miner, 1997; Scott & Meyer, 1994; Washington & Patterson, 2011). While purported to be powerful voices within the spheres of intercollegiate athletic conferences that may influence the organizational practices of member institutions ("The 10 most powerful people," 2007), the findings within this study point toward an isomorphic degree of helplessness within this population with little ability to curtail spending.

Sustainability of Intercollegiate Athletics

With only 14 of the 119 FBS institutions operating in the black (Fulks, 2010), compounded by the reality of current economic conditions and resulting state budget deficits, the negative impact of the arms race reported by the commissioners in this study confirms the literature (Knight Commis-

sion, 2009) and many of the headlines (Berkowitz, 2011; Dadigan, 2010) that have bemoaned the financial realities of intercollegiate athletics. This study adds an important layer to the scholarly investigations of the arms race because to date the commissioner's voice and valuable insights had not been explored in the research.

A particularly illuminating finding was the significant difference found between the responses of the AQ and non-AQ conference commissioners. Those representing the non-AQ teams felt a greater pressure as a result of the arms race. Lamenting the negative effect the arms race is having on his/her conference, Associate Commissioner 22 commented, "The distance between the 'haves' (AQ BCS conferences) and the 'have-nots' (non-AQ BCS conferences) is increasing and it is becoming increasingly difficult to remain competitive" (Associate Commissioner 22, non-AQ). This Associate commissioner echoes the literature that delineates the tremendous divide the BCS is creating between automatic qualifying schools and non-automatic qualifying schools ("BCS explained," 2010; Gardiner, et al., 2006; Hanna & Bruno, 2009; Knight Commission, 2009, 2010).

This divide and increased pressure between the AQ and non-AQ schools stems from a lesser payout from the BCS (Gardiner, et al., 2006) and possibly less visibility that would help those conferences garner donor support (Knight Commission, 2009). Essentially, this supports the existing research that asserts being in an AQ conference relieves

much of the pressure of the arms race (Clopton, 2008; Gardiner, et al., 2006; Knight Commission, 2009; Sack, 2009; University of Oregon, 2003). Supporting this literature ("BCS explained," 2010; Dadigan, 2010; Frie, 2011; Knight Commission 2009, 2010; Rapp, 2005), Associate Commissioner 22 asserted,

The BCS conferences can sustain operations in the current environment and the non-BCS cannot.... I predict that many of the non-BCS institutions will discontinue football in the near future because they simply can no longer afford to lose money supporting a program that has no chance to be competitive (non-AQ).

These vocal statements demonstrate the effect the current BCS system is having on collegiate athletics (Berkowitz, 2011; Hanna & Bruno, 2009) and leads to a conclusion that perhaps the conferences are not a dominant institution, but rather the BCS might hold a more significant level of influence within this sphere.

This is supported by the differences in focus among commissioners based upon automatic qualification status of the conference. In the data, AQ commissioners indicated belief that the holistic educational elements were a main benefit of intercollegiate athletics. Conversely, the non-AQ commissioners indicated that the fund raising benefits of athletics were the most important. This would indicate that the non-AQ schools have to spend more of their focus on generating funds and the AQ commissioners do not have to put as much focus into that aspect of intercollegiate

athletics when the budgets of the AQ vs. non-AQ conferences are compared. Based on these findings, it would appear that when money is flowing freely as it often is in AQ conferences, it creates the opportunity to focus on the holistic educational elements of intercollegiate athletics. When money is in short supply, fundraising becomes a much higher priority.

Conference Commissioner Perspectives on Responsibility

Regardless of AQ status, every commissioner indicated the arms race of expenditures was a concern. The commissioners strongly voiced a belief that the arms race is of primary concern for institutional athletic directors, followed closely by university presidents. It was after these two positions that they then listed the conference commissioner. This feeling of inability to curb the arms race at the conference level arises from the fact that a conference is run by a shared governance model wherein conferences are guided by member institution majority vote (Covell & Barr, 2010). Several commissioners voiced frustration with this system. Associate commissioner 12 recounted,

I would not say that we are making any efforts to 'curtail the arms race.' We did discuss cost containment, though, and proposed NCAA legislation that would achieve some level of cost containment (in areas where legislation exists), but all of those proposals were defeated. (AQ Commissioner 12)

This statement provides illumination to the finding of limited control over change the conference leaders expressed and supports a conclusion of isomorphic helplessness related to curbing the arms race within this commissioner population. Even when efforts to curb spending were attempted, their ability to enact change hinges on member votes (Covell & Barr, 2010) who appeared to be uninfluenced by the commissioner voices.

Commissioners emphasized this difficult balancing act when asked whether they held the power to reduce spending. The majority of the commissioners responded with “disagree,” while the lesser majority responded with “strongly disagree.” The Commissioners were clear that their sphere of control remained within their conference, and indicated that any real change to spending would have to be implemented nationally and with the agreement of all parties, such as the other conferences, the BCS, the NCAA, and the university presidents. The commissioners shared a few reasons why they felt any cost containment measures would not work at the conference level. One commissioner felt that “threat of antitrust violations hinder such efforts at the conference level” (AQ Associate Commissioner 12). Another commissioner stated that they would “need unanimity from all Division 1 conferences and independents to any effective action” (AQ Commissioner 14). Another Associate Commissioner agreed—“Not much can be done at the conference level. Any conference rules passed to limit expenditures or limit staff unless done at the national level

would only further harm the ability to remain competitive” (non-AQ Associate Commissioner 22).

At a first glance, these statements seem contrary to the data indicating the neutral to negative response given by conference leaders when asked if they thought uniting with other FBS conference leaders would give them the power to enact change (2.68, AQ; 2.63, non-AQ on a five point scale). A reliance on previous conference literature sheds light into this seeming contradiction. Covell & Barr (2010) emphasize the unique, regional span of control of a conference commissioner grounded in member-institution votes. So, while the data suggests the conference commissioners look to outside (national) sources for help with cost containment measures, it also suggests that inertia will not come from the conference level, but rather must be initiated at the institutional level on a national scale. These findings refute a hypothesis of commissioner influence over the arms race within the institutional sphere of the conference and support the need for a national governing body to enact change by using isomorphic pressure at the sport or university level as was demonstrated by *Sport Canada* (Slack & Hinings, 1994).

Conference Commissioner Perspectives toward Policy Change Proposals

The conference commissioners indicated that they did not have faith that any one policy change could have a significant impact on the arms race. Of all the reform suggestions taken from the

2009 Knight Commission Presidential Survey, no means were significantly higher than neutral (3.00). An automatic qualifying conference commissioner explains why this population may be disillusioned by reform efforts in a response to how they have addressed the issue in his conference.

I don't think it is a question of curtailing [the arms race]. We seem to underestimate that one of the most fundamental underlying premises of our enterprise is competition. At the [FBS] level in particular, there is a strong commitment to be successful whenever we compete, regardless of whom the opponent may be. That inherently leads to what could (be) described as an "arms race." But is it an "arms race," or is escalating spending merely a function of operating an enterprise that is based upon competing and winning? I would suggest that we became ok with an arms race when we sanctioned the model over 100 years ago. Consequently, the question isn't about curtailing, it's about making responsible spending decisions relative to your ability to generate the revenue needed to subsidize those decisions. (14)

This quote demonstrates the frustration the commissioners are feeling. Although much of the literature points to escalating spending as the primary ailment in collegiate athletics (Dadigan, 2010; Frie, 2011; Knight Commission 2010), it is the spending choices—often irresponsible spending—that is the problem (Knight Commission 2009, 2010). Going back to the cold war root of the term "arms race" and the stockpiling of arms, it is important to remember this term and the issue is not synonymous with escalating costs, but rather the frivolous

misallocation of precious resources (Knight Commission, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this study refute a hypothesis of commissioner influence over the arms race within the institutional sphere of the conference and support Thelin's (1996) assertion that conferences are orbits of competition and the commissioners have limited control over leading their member schools in agreed-on policies. The commissioners indicated a limited sphere of influence and pointed toward the need for policy changes to be enacted on a national scale (Washington, 2011) in order to implement any real cost curtailing measures. This data supports Washington and Patterson's (2011) assertion that the NCAA is the dominant institution in intercollegiate athletics.

The findings in this study provide a rich layer of insight to supplement the arms race literature and in particular the Knight Commission presidential study (2009). Both university presidents and conference commissioners agree that the current system is not sustainable, reinforcing the need for reform. Both populations indicated there is a need to change the current system, but interestingly enough, both felt that they were powerless to enact change. Finally, both groups articulated feeling pressure from the economic recession affecting their institutions and voiced legitimate concern about the sustainability of athletics in its current form.

Future research efforts can build upon the findings in this study by examining the perceptions of other stakeholders in the institutional sphere such as athletic directors. The commissioners indicated they do not have the power to implement these suggestions on a local level because their member institutions did not accept anything they have suggested. Thus, institutional buy-in related to reform initiatives is critical in order to enact change on the conference or national level. Additional research should be done to provide additional concrete reform suggestions and gauge the potential effect of implementing the suggestions nationally. Future research into the implementation of these potential policies would facilitate a more informed effort toward the reformation of college athletics.

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