

5-21-2023

The effect of intercollegiate athletic departments switching conferences

Austin Fischer
fischera7@csp.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/kinesiology_masters_science



Part of the [Sports Sciences Commons](#), and the [University Extension Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fischer, A. (2023). *The effect of intercollegiate athletic departments switching conferences* (Thesis, Concordia University, St. Paul). Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/kinesiology_masters_science/76

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Kinesiology at DigitalCommons@CSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Science in Kinesiology by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSP. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csp.edu.

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

COLLEGE OF KINESIOLOGY

The effect of intercollegiate athletic departments switching conferences

A GRADUATE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science in Coaching and Athletic Administration

by

Austin Fischer

St. Paul, Minnesota

June 2023

College Conference Realignment

Abstract

College conference realignment has been and will be an imposing threat to universities and colleges across all division levels. With significant money to be had in intercollegiate athletics, Athletic Directors (ADs) are looking to position themselves and their university in the most optimal position to elevate their schools' athletic brands. The literature review for this study utilized Concordia's online research library platform, as well as recent news articles regarding conference realignment. With college athletics media valuation continuing to increase, one can draw the conclusion that conference realignment is here to stay. This project was designed to ask Athletic Directors and University Presidents what effect the conference move has had on the school from a pre and post perspective.

Keywords: *Conference realignment, Athletic Director (AD), President*

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....1

Chapter 2: Methodology.....4

Chapter 3: Discussion and Conclusion.....7

References.....10

Appendix A.....11

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Capstone Project

Intercollegiate athletics can play a significant role in athletic brands, athletic budgets, and student enrollment. According to one study, “Schools moving into any FBS conference saw revenues increase by \$6.43 million, with expenses growing \$5.03 million” (Hoffer & Pincin, 2015, p.1). College Athletic Directors (AD), University Presidents, and Board of Regents members have the responsibility to make sure that their schools are set up for success for years to come. With success over time, schools become more well-known and athletic programs become a powerful brand for the university.

For Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) teams, a recent study found that football brand equity has an upward trajectory over time (Carr, 2014). If a college football program and athletic department can continue with this upward trend, they have a chance to gain national recognition and more exposure. With that exposure, comes options regarding college conferences, such as moving all sports or a specific sport to a different conference. There are currently ten FBS conferences and seven schools that play as FBS independents (ESPN, n.d.). With millions of dollars on the line from television contracts, season ticket sales, donations, and brand identity, moving to another conference can become a viable option.

Significance of the study

With the seismic shifts happening throughout college athletics, this study will seek to gain a better understanding of what the decision-makers in leadership positions are thinking about after they make a university change to switch conferences.

Research Question

The research question that is being posed for this study will be “when is the right time to switch athletic conferences?” Specifically, this topic will be investigated from the viewpoint of university ADs and Presidents. Based on research, there will likely be a variety of variables that will be included that may affect the decision to move conferences including money, travel, division level, and competition level.

Bias and Assumptions

There will be several biases at play in this study. One bias will be the researchers’ thoughts and beliefs on conference realignment and schools moving up to help create a better brand for their athletic programs. Also, in an ego--driven field such as being an AD or a President, it will be tough to have full honesty and if an individual is in one of those positions for a long period of time, that individual would have a bias towards the school. Assumptions towards this study and intercollegiate athletics in general is that everyone wants to compete with the best. This is not always the case. Often schools are comfortable with where they are at from a regional, financial, and athletics division level.

Limitations

As with any project, there will be several limitations and weaknesses to this study. The first and most obvious one will be the tenure of the administrations. There may be cases where the individuals who made the decision to switch conferences have either moved on or been terminated. Another limitation to this study will be the honesty and willingness of the ADs and University Presidents to participate in the study. As stated in Creswell and Creswell (2018),

when surveying human subjects, “the researchers must focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the issue” (p. 182).

Conclusion

Being able to follow up with Athletic Directors and University Presidents after they make significant changes to their athletic department is the reason behind this study. With all of conference changes occurring through intercollegiate athletics, individuals need to be held accountable for the perceived success or failure of a conference switch. This study will focus on the opinions of Athletic Directors and Presidents who have switched conferences to see what they believed has worked or if there have been second thoughts after switching.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

This study will take a deeper look into the reasoning of Director of Athletics (ADs) and Presidents leading their schools into different collegiate conferences. During this study, the Athletic Directors and Presidents will be asked to partake in a questionnaire. Data gathered from the questionnaire would add insight into the benefits and fallbacks for a university to switch athletic conferences.

Instrumentation

In order to gather data on the topic of university athletic programs switching conferences, the College Conference Switch Questionnaire was created (see Appendix A). The College Conference Switch Questionnaire begins with an Informed Consent Statement and then has a 5-item questionnaire regarding the school's previous conference affiliation and reason for the change. The questionnaire will consist of five questions that are in reference to the pre and post switch as follows:

1. What prompted the school to move intercollegiate athletic conferences? IE: What was the reasoning for the school moving conferences from an athletics standpoint?
2. Has the school needed to increase or decrease its athletic budget since moving conferences, if so, by how much?
3. Has the athletic department been able to add more positions (coaches and/or administrators) since moving conferences?
4. Was there any backlash, either positive or negative, that the athletics department/school received?
5. What was the season ticket and donor revenue prior and post switching conferences?

All of these questions are open-ended and will solicit qualitative data responses.

Participants

For this study, intercollegiate Directors of Athletics and University Presidents of schools who made a conference switch in the past 20 years will be asked to participate in a questionnaire. The participants will have a variety of differences that include leadership experience, tenure at the school, and experience in either public or private institutions. Of the 100 plus Division I institutions to have some form of conference change (*List of schools changing conference in the 2010-2014 NCAA conference realignment, 2020*), it is planned that at least 35 of those schools will commit to partaking in the interview and questionnaire process. This group of participants were chosen to add insight into the experience of switching athletic conferences on university leaders.

Procedures

To engage university leaders in this project, an initial email will be sent out to each school that was identified as having switched conferences in the past 20 years. The email will ask the AD or President to partake in the study. With college administrators having busy schedules, this study needs to have the flexibility to work around their schedules. If the ADs and Presidents do agree to participate, the five-question questionnaire will be sent to their email. Once the informed consent is given, participants will have access to the five questions. Once the questionnaires have been submitted, the results will be compiled and reviewed. It is important to keep the questionnaire short out of respect for each professional agreeing to partake in the study. Each questionnaire will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to finish.

Ethical Considerations

As with any study, this project has ethical issues to consider. To adhere to these, this project will undergo IRB approval at Concordia University, St. Paul, prior to beginning. There will not be any incentives offered for participants. Each participant will be asked to sign off on the informed consent prior to accessing the questionnaire. Also, all data collected will be anonymous and confidential.

Design & Statistical Analysis

The study design is a self-administered questionnaire. When the data is received from participants, analysis will take place comparing the answers from ADs and Presidents within each question. For example, the aspects of revenue will be examined, as will such information as added salaries, added positions (both coaching and administration), added donor revenue/tickets. During the data analysis for this study, thematic analysis will be used to identify the data that is received from the AD and/or President, to identify similar codes or reasoning and have that reasoning lead us into similar themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). From there, qualitative data analysis is performed to have a better interpretation of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Conclusion

The utilization of the questionnaire will help the study get a better understanding of these crucial decisions made by leadership team members regarding collegiate conference switching. This will be central to gaining a deeper understanding of why and how these decisions are made, as well as the consequences after the fact. This study will seek to find the variety of reasons for change, even if a decision-maker has multiple reasons for changing conferences.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

The reasoning behind this study and the use of the College Conference Switch Questionnaire is due to the ever-changing landscape of intercollegiate athletics. Conference realignment has been a part of college athletics since the conception of intercollegiate conferences (Kramer, 2016). With conferences originally shaped based on geographic locations, regional rivalries were born (Waite, 2011). Increased television and revenue dollars have taken off this century (Groza, 2010). With UCLA and USC heading to the Big Ten, and BYU, UCF, Cincinnati, and the University of Houston off to the Big 12, it has been made clear that money is a part of the reason they are changing conferences (Groza, 2010). Conference realignment has affected every division level that offers intercollegiate athletics, Division I, Division II, Division III, NAIA, JUCO, and NCCAA.

Thus, this topic sparked the interest to create a study that would communicate with administrators who decided to change conferences. Although it is predicted that money will be a key element in change, this study will investigate what other elements played a major role in switching conferences.

Practical Applications

If this study was to be conducted, there could be some great insight into what university Presidents and Athletic Directors think about when they make a colossal change like moving athletic conferences. A future athletic professional would be able to use the data in their thought process when considering possible conference affiliation moves. With the massive shift in conferences over the past couple of years, there will be significant opportunities for schools

looking to move up to a more competitive division level due to some conferences losing long time members.

Limitations

There will be several limitations in this study. The first limitation will be time that Presidents and Athletic Directors will have to give to participating in the questionnaire. Therefore, the questionnaire needed to be short, yet offer questions that are meaningful. Ideally, a study would have more time to question the decision makers. Another limitation in this study will be the high turnover rate that is seen in intercollegiate athletics. With the salaries that are earned at the AD and head coaching positions, there is added pressure to win. A lot of decisions regarding switching conferences are made by a past administration. If the switch goes well, they are more than likely heading to a school that can pay more. If the switch goes wrong, that AD could be out of a job and no longer available to participate in this study. A third limitation specific to this study will be the willingness for participation. This study could be well received with many participants or could be discarded with only a few participants.

Recommendations for Further Research

For future studies, there is a great opportunity to conduct a similar study to this proposed one at a national convention for either Athletic Directors or University Presidents. Running a study like this at a national convention would allow for more time to ask questions and give an opportunity to build rapport. Schools and athletic conferences would benefit the most from running a study like this. These professionals would be able to see what their peers have done to determine if it is the right move for their school.

Conclusion to Project

Understanding the positives and challenges behind making the decision to switch conferences is worthy of a deeper investigation such as this proposed study. The questions posed in the questionnaire were intended to find the “why?” in the decision-making process and if that move was in the school’s best interest. This topic is worthy of study to gain a deeper insight into the phenomenon for sport leaders in collegiate athletics.

References

- Carr, D. (2014). A longitudinal analysis of the effects of conference realignment on college football brand equity. *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- ESPN. (n.d.). *College Football Conferences*. Retrieved April 10, 2021, from <http://www.espn.com/college-football/conferences>
- Groza, M. (2010). NCAA conference realignment and football game day attendance. *Managerial and Decision Economics*, 31(8), 517–529. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mde.1506>
- Hoffer, A. & Pincin, J. (2015). The effects of conference realignment on NCAA athletic departments, *Applied Economics Letters*, 22(15), 1209-1223
- Kramer, D.A., II (2016). Motivations to switch: Refuting the public discourse on athletic conference realignment. *The Review of Higher Education* 39(3), 339-370. doi:10.1353/rhe.2016.0018.
- Waite, R. (2011). Conference realignment killing college rivalries. *University Wire*.

Appendix A

College Conference Switch Questionnaire

Informed consent statement: Austin Fischer, a graduate student at Concordia University, St. Paul, is conducting research on the experiences of collegiate Athletic Directors and Presidents pre and post changing athletic conference. There are no risks to participating in this survey and all answers will be anonymous. This project has been approved by Concordia's IRB and any questions can be sent to the lead researcher at fischera7@csp.edu.

By clicking into the survey, you are agreeing to participate in this project. Thank you!

1. What prompted the school to move intercollegiate athletic conferences? IE: What was the reasoning for the school moving conferences from an athletics standpoint?
2. Has the school needed to increase or decrease its athletic budget since moving conferences, if so, by how much?
3. Has the athletic department been able to add more positions (coaches and/or administrators) since moving conferences?
4. Was there any backlash, either positive or negative, that the athletics department/school received?
5. What was the season ticket and donor revenue prior and post switching conferences?