

# Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management

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Volume 3

Article 5

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2023

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### Recommended Citation

Havard, Cody T.; Ryan, Timothy D.; Hutchinson, Michael; and Fuller, Rhema D. (2023) "The Curious Case of Conference Realignment: A Call to Action for Research," *Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management*. Vol. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/finsheem/vol3/iss1/5>

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# *Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management*

*Topical Essay – Sport, Entertainment*

## **The Curious Case of Conference Realignment: A Call to Action for Research**

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### **Abstract**

This topical essay addresses the need for increased research related to the 2022-2023 iteration of conference realignment in college athletics. Namely, the essay provides a brief background on the massive shifts in major conferences beginning in the 2024-2025 school year. It suggests possible areas of inquiry for interested researchers that would provide benefit to academics, practitioners, and stakeholders of college athletics.

**Keywords:** Live Sports; Alternative Broadcast; Disney; Nickelodeon; Brand; NFL; NHL

## Conference Realignment

**The Issue**

Conference realignment is not new, as schools have chosen to change their athletic affiliation many times in the past. Examples include Penn State joining the Big Ten in 1990 (Wogenrich, 2023), Arkansas leaving the Southwest Conference (SWC) for the Southeastern Conference (SEC) in 1991 (Wojciechowski, 1990), and the ultimate folding of the SWC which led to four Texas schools combining with the Big 8 to form the Big 12 while remaining athletics departments joined the Western Athletic Conference or Conference USA in 1996 (Townsend, 2015). Further, from 2010 to 2013, over 40 schools in Division I changed athletic conferences (Havard, Wann, & Ryan, 2013), and four *Power Five Conferences* found themselves involved in the shuffle<sup>1</sup> (Thamel, 2010). The increased importance placed on media rights has superseded the original purpose of athletic conferences to help schools save money on travel, allow student-athletes to play opponents in closer proximities, and fans to attend more home and away games.

This is no more evident than the 2022-2023 iteration of conference realignment, which has seen four *Power Five Conferences* grow substantially while another (namely, the Pac 12) face the possibility of dissolution or merging with another conference. For the updated configuration of these *Power Five Conferences*, please refer to Table 1-henceforth referred to as *Power Conferences*). The major shifts of schools changing conferences at the time of this writing has led to changes at various levels of college athletics, and carry many implications for the future of intercollegiate competition, student-athlete well-being, fan travel and consumption, and even media rights negotiations. This topical essay addresses the need for additional research from across the fields of sport management, tourism and hospitality, education, and others to better understand how the latest iteration of conference realignment has and will impact the intercollegiate athletics product.

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<sup>1</sup> Namely, four Big 12 schools left the conference, with Nebraska joining the Big Ten, Colorado moving to the Pac 12, and both Texas A&M and Missouri switching to the SEC

<sup>2</sup> More athletics departments are now better able to be self-sufficient because of revenue from media rights negotiations.

**Background**

Whereas conferences once represented an attempt to help alleviate travel burdens for schools, student-athletes, and fans (Raby, 2023), they now more resemble umbrella organizations charged with looking out the financial benefit of their members. This focus on financial stability for member schools is needed, as in the past most schools were left to pay for the athletic department debts year over year (Sperber, 2001)<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, this approach has also led conferences to focus more on characteristics such as size of media market rather than travel distance for member schools (Hawkins, 2023). It had also meant that schools have to engage in activities such as escalation of commitment in building new facilities (Hutchinson, Nite, & Bouchet, 2015) and featuring many different qualities to make themselves attractive to prospective conferences<sup>3</sup>. This type of activity by schools and conferences has in turn led to the loss of traditional rivalries (Havard, Wann, & Ryan, 2013, 2017), which help to promote the sport product and encourage attendance for athletic contests-particularly for non-revenue producing sports (Havard & McGee, 2018).

Another very important impact of the massive conference realignment of the past decade is that on student-athletes. The travel associated with competing in intercollegiate athletics is intensive for many student-athletes. As larger media rights deals are available for schools that join a *Power Conference*, the cost of travel is not as encumbering as it previously was. However, the impact of the travel (e.g., longer distances and across multiple time zones) falls mostly on the student-athlete. At the time of writing there are two *Power Conferences* (e.g., Big Ten and Atlantic Coast Conference-ACC) whose membership reaches from the East Coast to the West Coast of the United States. While the impact of travel for major sports such as football is not as impactful because most games are played on or around the weekend, student-athletes having to travel across time zones for mid-week competitions face a growing number of challenges. For example, a student-athlete traveling from the East

<sup>3</sup> While schools invited to new conferences based on their increased spending see their commitments pay off, schools that continually engage in escalation without the desired outcome can be further hurt financially.



Coast to the West Coast to play a mid-week contest has to contend with playing a game three hours later than their normal time zone, which impacts travel to and from, and can have significant impact on class attendance and well-being. In fact, an important aspect of SMU's pitch to join the ACC was that they represent a central location between schools located on the West and East Coasts. To this point, research and understanding into the impact of conference realignment on areas such as travel and tourism, student athlete well-being, and educational pedagogy is lacking. Therefore, the rest of this topical essay discusses potential paths or inquiry needed to better understand the impact of conference realignment.

### Call to Action

As conference realignment greatly expanded over the last decade and continues to increase with intensity, researchers are presented with various avenues of potential inquiry that may impact travel and tourism research, sport management theory, educational pedagogy, and general psychology. First, impact on student-athletes is a much-needed area of study, specifically well-being among the most important. Further, researchers should engage in inquiry with student-athletes to better understand how the increase in travel may impact their academic and athletic performance, along with their perceived college experience (not to mention the additional emphasis on television and media revenue). Researchers should also speak with athletic administrators at both the conference and member school level in an attempt to better understand the decision-making process before and after joining (or attempting to join) a *Power Conference*, along with those already in such conferences attempts to remain relevant in the fear that only a few *Power Conferences* may remain in the future.

Inquiry at both the conference and school level is needed regarding how student-athletes are being supported moving into the future of college athletics. For example, will conferences engage in strategies such as scheduling 'travel partners' like the PAC 12 previously did, or will they even seek to schedule contests in which multiple schools compete in one location to cut down on the impact of travel on student-athletes? To that note, will more schools use the tactic employed by SMU to propose being a central location in a conference that spans a large distance? Further, what will the future of mid-week contests look like?

Will conferences limit most competitions to extended week ends (e.g., Thursday to Sunday) other than traditional revenue events appearing on television? For schools, will athletic department administrators increase their encouragement of student-athletes to take online rather than on-campus courses? For a student-athlete taking on-campus classes, the increased travel (especially across time zones) could lead to more absences and challenges, whereas a student-athlete taking online asynchronous courses in theory may be better able to work around their busy schedules. To help in this endeavor, will athletic departments increase the amount of resources available to student-athletes in the form of additional personnel traveling to help with academic performance and well-being (e.g., stress, anxiety, loneliness, etc.). Future research could also focus on how conference realignment and associated outcomes impact males and female student athletes, looking for similarities and differences.

Another interesting area of inquiry is the attempt of schools not currently in *Power Conferences* to engage in escalation of commitment with the hope of joining such a conference that are not invited. One important aspect of Southern Methodist University's (SMU) pitch to join the ACC was that they would not take media rights for seven years (Rumsey, 2023). While SMU may have an alumni base that can support the athletics department without much media rights for the first seven years of membership, will other schools with fewer resources and support attempt to follow in the same approach? If so, what impact will such decisions have on schools (e.g., higher student fees to help offset the cost of maintaining or gaining *Power Conference* status)? Another potential area of inquiry is that of the pay of coaches in high-profile sports such as football (known as the crossover point), and the impact of such behavior by athletics departments on college athletics and higher education.<sup>4</sup> More research in this area will help stakeholders better navigate conference realignment and the future of intercollegiate athletics.

A third area of inquiry is the continued research on the impact of conference realignment on consumer behavior. Previous study indicates that athletic administrators navigating a new conference should expect multiple years of competition before fans begin to embrace the new member schools, and any *rivals* (Havard & Eddy, 2013; Havard, Ryan, & Workman, 2018). Specifically, the need to identify a rival competitor entices fans to seek relevant out-groups in new conferences (Havard & Eddy, 2013), and

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<sup>4</sup> For more information, see the report from the Knight Commission on fiscal year 2022 at

[https://www.knightcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/financial\\_projections\\_exec\\_summary\\_2023.pdf](https://www.knightcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/financial_projections_exec_summary_2023.pdf)

## Conference Realignment

administrators should seek input from fans when building rivalries between schools (Havard, Wann et al., 2017). There is much more inquiry needed in this area to better understand how the loss of a traditional rival will influence consumer behavior, and both quantitative and qualitative methods can be used to address these questions.

An additional area of inquiry regarding consumer behavior is the willingness of fans to travel to see their school compete in a new conference. To date, athletic conferences have sought to add large media markets or marquee brands to their membership, which also may translate to fans wanting to travel to new destinations. For example, an ACC fan living on the East Coast may want to travel to see their school play in Dallas (SMU) or Northern California (California and Stanford) based on their locations, or Big Ten fans using an athletic event as a chance to visit Los Angeles (UCLA and USC) or Seattle (Washington). At the same time, a Big Ten fan may choose to combine a trip to Eugene, Oregon with one to visit Portland the same way they could when their favorite teams play Rutgers or Maryland based on their respective proximities to New York City and Washington, DC. Accordingly, how likely are fans of new conference members to travel to watch their school play in new locations (e.g., does location and destination matter to fans or is competition more important)?

Additional research is needed to determine if sport fans traveling to consume their favorite team are similar or different in their behavior from those traveling for other tourism reasons. For example, does someone traveling to watch their favorite team play behave the same way as someone taking a non-sport-related vacation. Further, are fans willing to travel to farther destinations in the long term, or only for the first few times their school visits a new location? Researchers should also investigate how the increased travel to see conference competitions may impact the hospitality industry. For example, will travel agencies begin to offer packages for fans wishing to follow their teams such as the ones identified above? Additionally, future research could focus on the willingness of fans to consume favorite team content using advances in technology such as virtual or augmented reality. For example, would consumers be more willing and excited to experience their favorite team playing via virtual or augmented reality or live attendance.

Another area of inquiry is the impact conference realignment can have on future media rights negotiations. Media companies, including traditional studios and tech companies, have long agreed to pay large sums of money to college athletics conferences to carry associated games on their networks. Companies essentially treat the large amounts of money they have to spend to carry live sports on their associated networks as loss-leaders that allow them to make sponsorship revenue and promote their shows to large audiences of viewers. However, reports during the latest conference realignment discussion indicate that possible changes are coming in media rights negotiations and that more research is needed in this area. Specifically, it was reported that ESPN turned down the Pac 12's counteroffer for more money per school which may have led to member schools choosing to look elsewhere (Cohen, 2023), and another suggested that Disney and ESPN were encouraging the Big 12 and/or ACC to look at adding schools from the Pac 12 so they could cover conference games in the Pacific Time Zone and thus not lose out to the Big Ten whose primary media partner is Fox (Wilner, 2023).

The future of live sports entertainment on terrestrial and streaming networks requires more research from academics to better understand how fans may consume the product (Havard & Ryan, 2022). The carrier fees negotiations between The Walt Disney Company and Charter Communications of September 2023 points to the possibility that more terrestrial cable providers may require access to streaming live sports for its customers as a way to slow down cord cutting (Rizzo, 2023)<sup>5</sup>. This, along with the negotiations regarding Comcast/Xfinity carrier fees with Fox properties could fundamentally shape the future of how live sports are consumed via terrestrial and streaming platforms (Green, 2023)<sup>6</sup>, which could impact future media negotiations among college conferences further exacerbating the current realignment trends. Additionally, more inquiry is deserved regarding how competition among media companies may influence the future of live sports rights negotiations and the subsequent impact on the college sport product (Havard, 2020). Finally, all of these decisions have to be analyzed by conferences and schools in an effort to seek balance in visibility with revenue. For example, playing more contests on services that are difficult for

<sup>5</sup> In the carriage agreement, Spectrum users at preferred tiers receive access to the ad-supported version of Disney+ and ESPN+, along with the future ESPN streaming service upon launch.

<sup>6</sup> Xfinity customers in certain markets lost access to Fox channels, including college and National Football Games in early September 2023.



customers to access may have long term deleterious effects for schools and conferences.

The expansion of conference realignment over the last decade plus has had a significant impact on most areas of college athletics, and continued research on its influence is needed to help future researchers, administrators, and students navigate current and future challenges and opportunities. The continued research into conference realignment is believed to be a fruitful endeavor for interested academics. This topical essay offers a call to action for such inquiry, and we hope it serves as a quality resource for anyone wanting to research and better understand this phenomenon.

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