

MAKING THE SWITCH:  
FACTORS AFFECTING AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS  
ABOUT ATHLETIC CONFERENCE REALIGNMENT IN FBS INSTITUTIONS

By

DENNIS ALLAN KRAMER II

(Under the Direction of Robert K. Toutkoushian)

ABSTRACT

Over the past ten years postsecondary institutions responded to the growing popularity of intercollegiate athletics by realigning with new athletic conferences. The public discourse on the reasons for these changes centers solely on athletic financial gain. However, institutional leaders and athletic administrators have long discussed the complexities and information rich nature of athletic conference realignment decisions. In the face of these complexities, few scholars have investigated the athletic conference realignment process. Thus, this study utilized a case study qualitative methodology to investigate the factors influencing athletic conference realignment and the role various campus actors played in the decision-making process. Using various organizational theories to frame the discussion of results, this study finds that access to additional conference revenue, increasing institutional visibility, and alignment with strategic peer institutions drove the athletic conference realignment process. While institution officials acknowledge a distinct set of reasons for engaging in athletic conference realignment, they also presented differences experienced in the strategic decision-making process. Results indicate institutions already placed within a powerful athletic conference

experiences different incentives than those moving from less prestigious conferences.

The three research questions that guided this study are:

RQ1: What are the primary factors affecting athletic conference realignment?

RQ2: What roles do various academic and institutional leaders play in broad-based athletic decisions about athletic conference membership?

RQ3: How do key concepts of resource dependence theory, institutional theory, and principal-agent theory explain athletic conference realignment at Division I-A institutions?

INDEX WORDS: Intercollegiate Athletics, Higher Education, Division I, FBS Conference Realignment, Resource Dependence Theory, Principal-Agent Theory, Neoinstitutionalism

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## DEDICATION

For the three biggest inspirations in my life: Julie, Carli, and Kylie.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Historically, intercollegiate athletic programs have generated controversy and debate within higher education. Scholars have long discussed the merits of higher education's sponsorship of intercollegiate athletics. The debate around college sports has intensified as both athletic revenues and expenditures have increased. Recently, the economic climate, the decline of state appropriations, and the increased competitiveness of external research grants have intensified scrutiny of athletics-based expenditures. Scholarly works focusing on the impact of intercollegiate athletics have produced mixed results. Toma (2002) found that athletics serve as a point of connection for current students and alumni, while Zimbalist (2000) articulated the exploitive nature of big-time, revenue-generating college sports.

Although the research is not conclusive on the role of intercollegiate athletics in promoting the academic core, the past 20 years of reform initiatives and calls for increased presidential oversight have produced few changes. Advocacy groups, such as the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics and Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics has, have proposed numerous reforms to align athletics with the academic core. This divide has permeated academic research on college sports, as little focus has been placed on the potential to leverage athletics-based decisions to increase both academic prestige and promote the "collegiate ideal" (Toma, 2002).

Escalating operating costs are the nexus of concern about intercollegiate athletics. Fulks (2008) reported that the median operating expenditures for athletics increased 43%

between 2004 and 2008, but the median revenue generated by athletic programs grew only 33% over the same period. The Knight Commission (2010) reported that the average athletics program spent the most money on the following items:

- Salaries and benefits, especially coaches' salaries (32% of total expenses)
- Tuition-driven grants-in-aid or sports scholarships (16%)
- Facility maintenance and rental (14%)
- Team travel, recruiting, and equipment and supplies (12% combined)
- Fundraising costs, guaranteed payments to opponents, game-day expenses, medical costs, sports camps, and other miscellaneous expenses (12% combined)
- Other (14%)

While expenditures and revenues have increased nationally, disparities among athletic conferences have emerged. In particular, the Knight Commission (2011) reported that athletic conferences within the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) saw equal increases in revenues and expenditures, while Division I-A Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions experienced expenditure increases more than four times that of revenues, thereby supporting the claim about the isomorphic behavior of non-BCS athletic programs and their leaders' desire to access "big-time" athletics-based revenue.

### **Primer on Athletic Conferences**

Athletic conference membership appears to be one of the unifying agents among athletic and academic departments. Both university and athletic administrators have a vested interest in conference membership, as "conference stereotypes can rub off on individual members" (Clotfelter, 2011, p. 133). This means that athletic conferences serve as an isomorphic agent against which institutions can both compare their academic

and athletic prominence. Those institutions holding a membership within a conference with less prestigious academic institutions will be viewed (in the public sphere) as less academically prestigious.

Historically, athletic conferences originated from a geographic need to organize intercollegiate football games. Rooney (1969) discussed the overlap between the primary regions of the United States and the regional focus of athletic conferences, ensuring teams could travel to competitions without significant disruption to academic courses. Clotfelter (2012) presented the current, and contradictory to Rooney (1969), discourse around athletic conferences by calling them, “essentially invitation-only clubs, providing their members with three useful services that could not be achieved on their own” (p. 82). These three services are: 1) scheduling and tournaments, 2) economy of scale when negotiating TV deals and media rights, and 3) membership revenue sharing. Each of these services provides incentives for institutions looking to increase their access to athletics-based revenues. Increases in proportional revenue-sharing activities, media-based dollars, and postseason payouts influence conference membership (Clotfelter, 2012).

While conferences play a major role in facilitating athletic competition and media rights negotiations (Duderstadt, 2009), a conference membership also facilitates academic coordination. The Big Ten has an interlibrary loan program (Rooney, 1969), while other institutions have advocated that their conference peers join prestigious organizations, such as The Association of American Universities (Duderstadt, 2009). The role athletic conferences play in facilitating both athletic and academic initiatives matters

greatly for institutional leaders, as they select the athletic conferences with which they would like to be associated.

### **Athletic Conference Realignment**

Since the beginning of the athletic conferences in 1896, over 100 institutions have changed their membership. However, athletic conference realignment has gained increased prominence in the media within the past 10 years (Kramer & Trivette, 2012). Historically, conferences have been structured in two ways: as a collection of institutions that possess 1) similar academic and demographic configurations and 2) geographic proximity (Sweitzer, 2011). These structures support Sweitzer, Shuman, and Bowen's (2001) claim that athletic conferences were created as a mechanism to promote "a dependable set of competitions with interests that were at least generally aligned with their own" (p. 16).

Despite the longstanding nature of athletic conferences, academic scholars have not paid much attention to the direct or indirect impact of athletic conference realignment on academic and athletic outcomes. Even less attention has been paid to the quantification of the factors affecting athletic conference realignment. However, media sources have long speculated about possible reasons for conference realignments. Tribou (2011) found that the media presented four primary reasons for athletic conference realignment: 1) to increase media exposure, 2) to generate additional revenue through third-party sponsorships and media contracts, 3) to create a competitive athletic and scheduling advantage, and 4) to gain access to national championship competitions.

The recent wave of conference expansion is often attributed to events in early 2009 (Tribou, 2011). In particular, the Big Ten's desire to add two teams to its

conference created multiple discussions from other conferences about the possible expansion or retention of current members. Tribou (2011) stated that the primary motives for the Big Ten's expansion involved the expansion of the media market footprint and the increased number of conference teams that would foster a potentially lucrative conference championship game. In response to the Big Ten's potential expansion, the Pacific-10 (now Pacific-12) leaders expressed a similar desire to expand membership. Pacific-10 leaders were entering into negotiations on new media rights and TV contracts. This possible expansion (the addition of two teams) would create the opportunity to host a conference championship game and leverage this competition exposure during the contract negotiation process. Thamel (2011) stated that the one constant factor associated with athletic conference realignment was "...money. Other than that, there've been a lot of different reasons, agendas, but at the end of the day, these school presidents are chasing the almighty dollars" (n.p.).

The responsibility for conducting the renegotiation process falls on the shoulders of not only campus or athletic leaders but also politicians. Politicians have frequently attempted to exert their (perceived) influence on the realignment process. For example, the announcement by the University of Missouri that it was leaving the Big-12 and joining the Southeastern Conference created an opening in the Big-12. This prompted Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, the senate majority leader, to contact a number of Big-12 institutions to request the admission of the University of Louisville (Tribou, 2011). This political push occurred in spite of the fact that the University of Louisville had recently reaffirmed its desire to remain in its current conference.

Despite the intense focus of the media on the financial gains surrounding athletic conference realignment, some institution officials have discussed a competing ideology. In an interview, Notre Dame's athletic director stated that athletic conference realignment is an effort to enhance the academic profile of the institutions and their university leaders, rather than athletic leaders, so the university leaders themselves are advocating for athletic conference realignment (Forde, 2010). Also, within the conversation about athletic realignment, reductions in travel expenditures and time have emerged as potential reasons for considering new athletic conference membership (Forde, 2010).

Given the opportunity to increase revenue at both the conference and institutional level, conference realignment has become a primary task for athletic administrators. One athletic director stated that since 2009 (the advent of the most recent round of athletic conference realignments), more than 90% of an athletic director's core job functions involved either examining the feasibility of expansion or combating the "poaching" of current members (Tribou, 2011).

### **The Role of Athletics in the Decision-Making Process**

The high-stakes nature of athletic conference realignment decisions exemplifies the microcosm associated with the role of athletics in postsecondary decision making and governance. Scholarly attention to the influence of athletics on institutional policy making remains under-examined. Most of the literature provides descriptive, personal, or institutional accounts of the role of athletics in policy formation or outside calls for athletics-based reforms. Kezar and Eckel (2004) defined governance as a "process of policy-making and macro-level decision-making within higher education" (p. 375). Kezar and Eckel further discussed how policy and decision-making processes involve multiple

levels and an entity with varying degrees of authority. To this end, decision making and governance of intercollegiate athletics are a part of policy making within athletics departments, thereby ensuring compliance with NCAA bylaws, fiscal management, personnel management, resource acquisition, and, most importantly, academic policy development, which guarantees opportunity for student-athletes.

The complexity of athletic decisions is due, in part, to the many actors involved in the management of college sports. In particular, the push for control by the president and board of trustees over the financial aspects of college sports (KCIA, 2011), the role of the Faculty Athletic Councils (FAC) (Duderstadt, 2000), and the business mentality of contemporary athletic directors (Palmero, 2010) have produced a complex and multi-level accountability structure. Adding conference commissioners, the NCAA, and external supporters (e.g., corporate sponsors and alumni) further complicates and dilutes the role of campus-based leaders as they manage athletics-based decisions. The combination of these different actors produces competing priorities and makes consensus building difficult.

### **Problem Statement**

Since their inception, intercollegiate athletic programs have spurred debates between academics and practitioners in terms of their importance and placement within the academic mission of higher education. This dialogue has escalated over the past 30 years, as the college sports industry has grown in size, scope, and complexity. As a result of this increasing popularity, intercollegiate athletic programs have become a critical part of college presidents' portfolio of responsibilities (Duderstadt, 2000). Intercollegiate athletic programs require a significant amount of a university president's time and

attention because athletics attracts more public attention and visibility than any other university activity (Duderstadt, 2007).

At the nation's more prominent higher education institutions, intercollegiate athletics are used as institutional signals of the collegiate ideal, national branding, and institutional identity, as well as, in some cases, an auxiliary revenue-producing entity. The marriage of sports and postsecondary institutions is an historic accident (Toma & Kramer, 2009). Those discussing this marriage must differentiate between motives. Is sport substantially commercial or committed to its historical mission of participation? The former has been a topic of great interest, particularly as it relates to the depreciation of academic values (Sperber, 2000; Zimbalist, 2001). The latter involves the degree to which colleges and universities are vested in their intercollegiate athletic programs. One should view intercollegiate athletics as operating along a continuum with pure amateur competition at one end and a highly commercialized and near-professional competition at the other. The level of intentionality and positioning of athletic programs along the continuum merits further academic inquiry.

Complicating the discussion of intercollegiate athletics and the academic core is the inherent complexity of decision factors, the diversity of perspectives, and the constant conflict over academic values between intercollegiate athletics and the academic core. For this reason, the influence of institutional leadership and athletic success, the university's position on athletic management, and institutional decision making are ripe for meaningful research. Few scholars have attempted to quantify the role of academics in athletics-based decisions or the factors affecting these decisions. Often, discussions of these decisions focus on financial gains or revenue maximization. While this may be true,

gaining a holistic understanding of the actual realities is important for both academics and athletics scholars.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the full range of institutional factors involved in athletic conference realignment decisions. Despite the fact that realignment is a process in which a conference and an institution share interest and derive benefits, this dissertation focuses on “push” factors: the anticipatory impacts and institutional considerations in making a decision on potential conference realignment. Factors affecting conferences’ interest in extending membership to certain institutions are important in considering the holistic determinants of the conference realignment process. However, these determinants are outside the scope of this research.

The results clarify the inherent connections between athletics and academics, along with an understanding of the role of campus leaders and the factors they consider during the conference realignment process. Interviews and public documents offer specific insights into mechanisms and key factors by which campus leaders make decisions regarding athletic conference membership. Possible influencers of realignment decisions are, among others, student demographics, academic and athletic finances, institutional prestige, and the impact of key actors within university decision making. The ways in which institutions and athletics departments decided to engage in broad affiliation changes, facilitate new conference rivalries, and seek additional athletics-based revenue streams offer an unambiguous view of the priorities athletic and academic leaders set. These priorities have the potential to affect student-based outcomes, institutional policies, and the overall institutional culture (Toma, 2003).

The primary motivation and rationale behind this study was the existing debate that college athletic programs tend to “silo” themselves from the broader institution. Few scholars have attempted to look at the connectedness of intercollegiate athletics and the academic core to ascertain the potential for leveraging athletic decisions to increase overall academic prestige. The discourse on intercollegiate athletics is oftentimes biased and negative; in contrast, I aimed to break down the silos and create an integrated conversation about the potential of looking at intercollegiate athletics as an agent of prestige for the academic enterprise.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Building on Denzin’s (1989) recommendations, I employed theory triangulation to better understand athletic conference realignment through multiple frames. This triangulation fosters an approach to the interpretation of results where the use of multiple theories uncovers the complexities of athletic conference realignment that a more narrow approach might leave undetected. The intersection of these different theoretical origins helped me to arrive at an integrated theoretical framework to best analyze and understand this multi-site case study.

First, I drew upon DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) institutional theory. The economic survival of organizations is at the heart of institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977); however, neo-institutional theorists now believe that organizations must continually operate with the goal of survival within an institutional environment. Neo-institutional theorists view organizations as socially constructed, which is a departure from the traditional roots of institutional theory (i.e., economic conformity and survival). In developing the neo-institutional approach, scholars have discussed two pathways for

organizations to influence individual behaviors. Organizations can cause individuals to maximize benefits (*regulative* institutions) or to act out of duty, doing what is “supposed” to be done (*normative* institutions). A new addition to the neo-institutional approach is the influence of cognition. Under this influence, instead of responding to rules or obligation, individuals act on the basis of conceptions (Scott 2001). To survive, organizations balance peer pressures and the need to find legitimacy through the replication of successful and established norms, values, and practices.

The pressure to survive within an organizational environment has led to the development of homogeneous practices, accepted norms, and a set of values that Meyer and Rowan (1977) labeled mechanics of isomorphism:

Organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized society. Organizations that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures (p. 340).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 1991) noted two types of organizational homogeneity. The first was *competitive isomorphism*, which is derived from a focus on market forces, and the second is *institutional isomorphism*, which is rooted in conformity and organizational legitimacy. DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 1991) also discussed the important concept of institutional isomorphism and identified three mechanisms: (1) coercive, or the conformity of practices and structure to best practices; (2) mimetic, or the reduction of uncertainty that leads to the imitation of successful peers; and (3) normative, or the

professionalization to legitimate structures and practices through both formal and informal education.

Proponents of resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) contend that organizations depend on outside resources for survival and, in turn, tend to rely on these external organizations to shape their identities and direction. This theory also provided a framing mechanism through which to view athletic conference realignment. In contrast to traditional economic theory, where scholars assume that organizations maximize profits, resource dependence theory highlights the primary goals of survival, autonomy, and power. Proponents acknowledge that all organizations require resources from external environments to survive (Parsons, 1956). Organizational survival is directly linked to a consistent stream of resources, as resource volatility creates an inability to plan and execute efficiently. In higher education literature, scholars have proposed that college and university leaders seek to increase their prestige by acquiring resources necessary for survival (Grunig, 1997; Pfeffer & Moore, 1980; Volkwein & Sweitzer, 2006).

Using resource dependence theory, Grunig (1997) examined how reputation motivates institutional behavior. He contended that institutional characteristics, such as the level of doctoral enrollment, the level of undergraduate enrollment, standardized tests scores, and research and development activities, influence an institution's reputational rankings. He asserted that college and university leaders structure activities in such a way as to make them valuable in the environments in which they exist. An institution's leaders adjust that institution's size and selectivity to enhance its perceived service quality through reputational rankings, thereby allowing the institution to acquire more

resources (Grunig, 1997). Grunig (1997) argued that when university administrators focus on increasing their institution's reputation through increased selectivity and research productivity, they do so for the survival of the institution at a time of reduced funding from external sources. Research on resource dependence provided a lens through which to view intercollegiate athletic decisions as a product of both athletic and institutional characteristics.

Finally, principal-agent theory (agent theory) describes a relationship in which a principal induces an agent to act on behalf of an organization (Kivisto, 2008). Proponents postulate that a mutual need must exist between the principal and the agent for that mechanism to succeed. Relying heavily on political science and economic assumptions, proponents have used the theory's central components to explain inter-organizational relationships in many disciplines. Within higher education, Ortmann and Squire (1996) first articulated the benefits of understanding the complexity of institutional relationships (i.e., differing missions between teaching and patent-producing research) using principal-agent theory. Since then, a number of higher education scholars have utilized principal-agent theory to describe the relationships among higher education institutions, their systems, and state governments (Lane, 2007; Lane & Kivisto, 2008; McLendon et al., 2006). Within intercollegiate athletic decisions, the university and its president serve as the principal, and the athletics director serves as the agent.

Reade (2010) applied the components of agency theory to the inter-organizational management of non-profit sports in Canada. Reade found that the non-profit sporting agency provided an interesting case study for agent theory, as the athletic organization controls day-to-day operations, while the governing agency, the funding mechanism and

incentives. Reade continued by specifying that competing ideologies, combined with the interdependence of the entities, facilitated the ideal application for Canadian sports.

Reade concluded by speculating on the application of agency theory to other non-profit sporting agencies, such as intercollegiate athletics within the United States.

Dial (2013) utilized principal-agent theory to describe the impact of intercollegiate athletics at the Division III level. He found that principal-agent theory did not fit the nuances associated with lower-division athletic departments. Athletic administrators shared common goals with their institutional presidents in terms of athletic and institutional management (Dial, 2013). However, he stated that the “principal-agent theory does provide a unique and arguably valid lens for viewing big-time, Division I athletic programs” (p. 87).

Nwosu (2012) heeded Reade’s (2010) recommendations, applying principal-agent theory to the management of U.S. intercollegiate athletics as well as recent athletic conference realignments. Specifically, Nwosu applied principal-agent theory to the understanding of the interplay between institutions and conferences during athletic conference realignment. Nwosu concluded that principal-agent theory was an appropriate framework for explaining the external relationship between athletic departments and their conference suitors.

Aspects of neo-institutional theory, resource dependence theory, and principal-agent theory provided me with a number of tools to better understand the factors that influence athletic conference realignments and the role of campus leaders in the athletic conference realignment process. Given that intercollegiate athletics serves as a highly publicized aspect of higher education, decision making within athletics is multi-faceted

and includes diverse actors. Also unclear is whether athletic departments are influenced by the same factors as postsecondary institutions during the decision-making process. The integration of these theories allows for effective analysis of whether activities are truly strategic or simply reactionary. Utilizing a single theoretical approach would not fully capture the intersection of all of these different influencing factors and stakeholders' roles. With the complexities of athletics-based decisions, anyone would expect to find numerous theoretical overlaps. For example, prestige-seeking behavior or the key assumptions of neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) will likely continue to challenge resource dependence theory regarding the clear definition of revenue maximization within the decision-making process.

In addition to the dichotomy between institutional theory and resource dependence theory, an analysis of the mutuality of the principal-agent theory will likely cross over into resource dependence theory. Since each individual theory fails to account for the unique and complex environment of intercollegiate athletic decision making, I expect that where one theory fails, another will provide analytical continuity. For example, an institution might seek to expand access to an alternative revenue stream by utilizing athletic conference realignment as a mechanism to access television revenues. Resource dependence theory might help in understanding the role of external funding sources and institutional leaders' desire for fiscal stability. Tenets of isomorphism might further help in understanding why institutions react to athletic or academic peers when making athletics-based decisions.

The primary aim of this study was to identify the factors that influence athletic conferences' realignment along with the role of institutional leaders in making decisions.

Do institutional leaders alter their athletic conference realignment decision making in reaction to peer influence? What are the primary factors motivating institutional leaders' decision to change their institution's athletic conference membership? Institutional leaders are responding to these pressures, and some have already made realignment decisions that will alter their institution's athletic and academic identities. Examining these decisions shortly after they have been made will lead to a deeper understanding of institutional priorities and the decision-making process. The decision to select participations after, rather than prior to, ensured that institutional leaders could consider the full range of factors associated with the decision-making process. Intercollegiate athletic programs continue to grow in popularity with both incoming students and external supporters. Media outlets are increasingly scrutinizing athletic decisions. This necessitates an understanding of the roles institutional leaders play and factors influencing athletic decisions within contemporary postsecondary institutions.

### **Research Questions**

Framed by the theories and literature described above, in this exploratory study, I sought to identify factors affecting athletic conference realignment decisions. In addition, I aimed to isolate the institutional determinants associated with athletics-based, prestige-seeking decisions. As such, the research questions addressed were:

RQ1: What are the primary factors affecting athletic conference realignment?

RQ2: What roles do various academic and institutional leaders play in broad-based athletic decisions about athletic conference membership?

RQ3: How do key concepts of resource dependence theory, institutional theory, and principal-agent theory explain athletic conference realignment at

## Division I-A institutions?

I employed an in-depth case study approach to gain an understanding of the factors affecting athletic conference realignment, the decision-making process, and the role of the various campus actors in deciding to change athletic conferences. Data from interviews with campus leaders were triangulated with document analysis and survey-based data. Combined, they facilitated a robust discussion of the factors affecting the decision to realign athletic conferences and the roles of key decision makers within that process. A combination of organizational theories helped to explain the differences among institutions on the way athletics-based decision are made.

## **Overview of Dissertation**

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. The first chapter introduces the readers to the ideas driving the primary research questions around athletic conference realignment. Furthermore, the first chapter presents the multi-dimensional theoretical framework used to frame not only the inquiry but also the results and conclusions.

Chapter 2 presents a synthesis of the literature based on the role of intercollegiate athletics within higher education, the key institutional actors involved in athletics-based decision making, and the organization of college sports. Chapter 2 begins by focusing on the placement of athletics within the university setting. Careful consideration is given to the economic and non-economic benefits of sponsoring intercollegiate athletics. Next, the chapter provides an overview of the literature on athletics-based decisions and the key factors involved in the management of athletic programs. The chapter concludes with a review of the literature involving the way intercollegiate athletics is organized both nationally and within individual institutions.

Chapter 3 explains the study's research methodology: a multiple-case study approach of three institutional case sites that maximize variations across athletic conference realignment types. This approach allows for researching the 'how' and 'why' for broad-based decisions that include multiple decision makers. Following Yin's recommendations (2002), I chose a multiple-case design over a single case study for the following reasons: 1) results gathered through interviews from multiple cases are often more compelling than those from a single case, and 2) given that each discrete type of athletic conference realignment can be considered a different 'site', a multiple-case design provides the opportunity to deepen the understanding of the commonalities and differences across realignment types.

Chapter 4 begins with a document analysis of the three case sites, providing information on both the institutional characteristics and past athletic history. The chapter then presents data on the three primary themes around the athletic conference realignment decision. Direct quotes from institutional and athletic leaders offer insight into the factors influencing athletic conference realignment and the role of various institutional actors within that decision. The chapter concludes with a comparison of the case site results with a nationally represented survey of institutional leaders' engaging in athletic conference realignment.

The intersection of the results I presented in Chapter 4 and the theoretical frameworks I discussed in Chapter 1 appears in the final chapter – Chapter 5. Here, I discuss the connection between prior positioning within the athletic conference hierarchy and the rationalization for engaging in athletic conference realignment. I then highlight

implications for future research and practice to inform future inquiry and engagement into athletic conference realignment.

### **Definitions and Related Concepts**

The following terms and concepts are used throughout this document:

***Athletics Director (AD):*** The individual responsible for the financial, physical, human, and ethical oversight of an intercollegiate athletics program (Spivey, 2008).

***Athletic Conference Realignment:*** An event where institutional leaders publicly acknowledge a move from one athletic conference to another. This acknowledgment usually comes in the form of a press release or official communication from the university. For the purposes of this study, I considered only schools that changed conferences for their revenue-generating sports, or all sports, as institutions that made a conference switch. For this study, I indicated the athletic conference realignment year at the time of the announcement rather than the year of implementation.

***Automatic Qualifier (AQ):*** An athletic conference in the NCAA Division I-A FBS whose champion receives an automatic berth in one of the five BCS games. While the number of AQ conferences varies, the BCS has had six AQ conferences since its inception in 1998.

***BCS:*** The BCS is a selection system that creates five bowl match-ups involving 10 of the top-ranked teams in the FBS, including an opportunity for the top two to compete in the BCS National Championship Game.

***Commercialization:*** This is the sensationalized status intercollegiate athletics has received due to media coverage, revenue generation, and business modeling that has saturated intercollegiate athletics (Duderstadt, 2000).

***Division I:*** Colleges and universities in Division I are more spectator oriented than other divisions and sponsor one or both of the spectator-oriented, income-producing sports of football and basketball. Division I institutions recognize the complex and interchangeable objectives in their athletic programs of serving both the university and the college community and the public (NCAA, 2010).

***Division I-A:*** These institutions must meet all Division I criteria, sponsor the highest level of intercollegiate football, and meet minimum paid football attendance criteria (NCAA, 2010). In 19XX, Division I-A was renamed the FBS.

***Division II:*** These institutions vary in size and educational missions. They value traditional rivalries with regional institutions and require fewer scholarships and lower financial commitment than Division I institutions (NCAA, 2010).

***Division III:*** These colleges and universities place their highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students' academic programs in an environment in which a student-athlete's athletic activities are conducted as an integral part of the educational experience. Division III athletes may not be awarded athletic-related financial aid (NCAA, 2010).

***Faculty Governance:*** This term refers to the methods and structures of the mechanisms of faculty involvement on campus that govern a variety of processes, including, but not limited to, the conduct of athletic programs at some institutions (Feezell, 2005).

***Governance:*** This is a multi-level phenomenon, including various bodies and processes with different decision-making functions. Certain entities tend to have authority over specific decisions, such as a faculty senate for curricula or boards of trustees for budgetary issues (Kezar & Eckel, 2004).

***National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA):*** The NCAA was established in 1906 as the governing body for intercollegiate athletics for members, colleges, and universities. The governing body makes and enforces regulations that are related to athletic eligibility, recruitment, and financial aid (NCAA, 1998).

***Revenue-Generating Sports:*** Revenue-generating sports, such as football and men's and women's basketball, generate large sums of money for Division I schools. For the purposes of this study, revenue-generating sports include football and men's basketball.

***Student-Athlete:*** For the purposes of this study, student-athletes are undergraduates enrolled in a college or university who participated in intercollegiate sports at Division I member institutions.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study are valuable to several populations within higher education. In particular, this study can assist Division I institutions as they make athletic conference realignment decisions. While useful, scholars must recognize that several portions of this study are limited by the generalizability of the findings to a broader set of institutions.

I utilized a qualitative case study approach, which, by its very nature, limits the generalizability of these findings to the case sites. The use of triangulating data from survey and document analysis increased the generalizability of the results. Nevertheless, the results of this study are still limited.

In keeping with a qualitative approach, I endeavored to include direct quotations whenever possible to allow readers to determine whether this study's findings apply to their institutions. Furthermore, the three institutions in this study are all Division I-A athletic institutions. Even though I selected these institutions intentionally to maximize

variation, readers attempting to extrapolate the study's findings to other institutional types should proceed with caution. Even within the realm of Division I athletic programs and institutions, there are different types of institutional governance structures. Readers of this study should remember that this study's findings were determined solely for Division I-A institutions that recently experienced athletic conference realignment. The data for this study focus on a single realignment event for each institution. As such, decision makers, institutional priorities, and strategic planning could change.

Finally, the highly politicized nature of athletic conference realignments creates incentives for individuals to discuss "politically correct" answers to interview questions rather than the realities. I addressed this concern by providing anonymity to the individuals as well as building a strong and trusted rapport. Regardless of the steps taken to mitigate this limitation, readers should view the results with this in mind.

### **Summary**

The continued escalation of intercollegiate athletics within the postsecondary experience creates the additional pressures of not only athletic success but also appropriate integration into the academic core. This chapter provided an introduction to the integration of athletic programs, structures, and decision making within postsecondary institutions. I paid particularly close attention to the role of athletic conferences in the management of revenue-generating activities and the potential role of academic leaders in the athletic decision-making process. To assist with the framing of the results, I proposed a blended conceptual framework that attempted to explain potential theoretical approaches for understanding the institutional determinants and roles of campus leaders in conference realignment.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The aim of this study was two-fold: to identify the factors influencing athletic conference realignment and to gain an understanding of the decision-making process and the key actors involved in the decision to change athletic conferences. The results of this study will benefit not only athletic administrators but also university presidents, conference executives, and external stakeholders, as they highlight opportunities to collaborate between collegiate academic and athletic enterprises. The public discourse around college sports is polarized; many view athletics as the primary point of connection for the community (Toma, 2003), while others view athletics as an unsustainable financial strain on the core academic mission (KCIA, 2011). This chapter provides an overview of the positionality of intercollegiate athletic programs within higher education, outlines the impact of various actors on the governance of athletics-based decision making, and summarizes the background literature related to this study.

#### **Athletics in the University**

A staple of the American higher education system is the ability for institutions to distinguish themselves from one another by individually addressing the needs of their students and communities (Smith, 1988). Postsecondary institutions are allowed to freely expand and enhance programs that their leaders and supporters view as important. Institutions have invested in large-scale research centers and programs to recruit elite research-based scholars (Hearn, McClendon, & Lacy, 2013) to develop a strong research culture. Other institutions have focused on undergraduate teaching and service to support

their mission to benefit the public. In addressing the ability to differentiate, the NCAA (2006) stated, “We tend to think of higher education as a homogeneous collection of colleges and universities, as individuals are varied and aggressively competing with one another for resources, talent, and standing” (p. 23). This is a precursor to the justification for the rapid expansion of intercollegiate athletic programs.

In addressing the role of intercollegiate athletics within the academy, Chu (1989) identified the core missions of higher education institutions as support for instruction, research, and service. Similar to the corporate sector, contemporary postsecondary institutions have evolved with increasing pressures. Contemporary institutions have begun to invest and promote programs that were “contradictory and unrelated activities both academic and non-academic in nature” (Chu, 1989, p. 60). The movement away from core academic activities created the opportunity for university and athletic programs to gain prominence (Smith, 1988). In fact, “athletics eventually came to be an important part of the success equation” (p. viii).

The increased interest in intercollegiate athletics coincided with a time during which institutional survival was directly related to changes within institutional missions and the expansion of student services (Chu, 1989). As athletic prominence grew, institutions were engaging in “arms races” in a variety of sectors inside and outside of athletics (Veysey, 1965). Academic leaders learned early on that the development of a successful athletics program produced increases in institutional prestige and perceptions of students (Flowers, 2009). This “reputation for excellence” (Chu, 1989, p. 30) permeated various aspects of universities, engendered national attention, and enhanced reputations while increasing institutional exposure. Athletics also served as the

counterfactual to the increases in enrollment and the disconnect between students and universities as these institutions grew (Rudolph, 1990).

### ***Historical Aspect of College Sports***

Before discussing the contemporary environment in greater detail, it is important to provide a historical review of intercollegiate athletics. Despite their entrenched placement within higher education today, intercollegiate athletics had humble beginnings in the early 1850s. The exact origin of intercollegiate athletics has been contested by athletic historians (Andre & James, 1991; Thelin, 2004); however, they have agreed that the beginning of the current intercollegiate athletics can be traced to 1852, when students at Harvard and Yale were interested in organizing games and rowing competitions (Andre & James, 1991). The advent of college football coincided with a game between Rutgers and Princeton in 1869 and signaled the next era of college sports (Rudolph, 1990). The scandal and brutality that followed created an athletic culture of competition and opprobrium that still exists today.

Prior to the reforms of the early to mid-1900s, athletic activities were separate from the formal structures of colleges and universities. Students organized these early athletic competitions with little interference from college or university faculty or administrators. The primary focus was students' physical development and health rather than inter-campus competition (Rudolph, 1990).

By the end of the 1800s, college sports had grown rapidly (Gerdy, 1997), and college administrators became interested in incorporating athletics into the mission of higher education. These leaders realized athletics' potential for providing fiscal benefits to the institution, increasing prestige and recognition, and satisfying the public's growing

interest in college sports (Gerdy, 1997). According to Fleisher, Goff, and Tollison (1992), significant expansion took place during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, as intercollegiate athletics grew from a small industry into a nationwide preoccupation.

This tremendous growth and commercialization resulted in many of the issues and abuses that remain in college sports today. Following the years of abuse and distortion of the educational mission, advocates made concerted efforts to reform intercollegiate athletics. Yet throughout the history of American higher education, athletic programs have played an important part in the campus life of most institutions (Duderstadt, 2000). In balancing intercollegiate athletics and academics, the University of Chicago, Harvard University, Yale University, and the majority of the Ivy League resisted the push to commercialize and increase athletic prominence (Thelin, 2004). The University of Chicago, and its legendary coach Walter Camp, started its football program in 1892 and was instantly the preeminent program in the nation (Rudolph, 1990). By that time, the University of Chicago had embraced the recruitment of elite scholars, the incorporation of graduate education, and the education of women within this world-class institution (Rudolph, 1990). The sponsorship of an athletic department (football in particular) was the only item left between the University of Chicago and the institutional ideal.

The University of Chicago went on to hire Alonzo Stagg as its football coach, who experienced unprecedented success for 40 years (Thelin, 2004). The success of this football program created an institutional environment where excellence permeated all academic programs and institutional activities (Rudolph, 1990). Throughout the years of success at the University of Chicago, the football program, and the entire athletic program, increased its prominence on campus and importance within resource

allocations. However, in 1939, the University of Chicago decided to discontinue its football program, due in part to escalating commercialization and the disconnect between football-based activities and core academic pursuits (Thelin, 1996).

The University of Chicago was at the forefront of what Benford (2007) called “edutainment,” the combination of education and commercialized activities within an academic institution. While only a few academic institutions have decided to abandon intercollegiate football (or other sports), every university sponsoring intercollegiate athletics has felt an increase in the prominence athletics plays on campuses over the past 100 years (Sperber, 2000). During this timeframe, “to students, the concerns of the game, the pep rally, or practice take easy precedence over classes, laboratories, or papers” (Chu, 1989, p. 1).

The contemporary narrative of athletics in universities polarizes academic and athletic professionals. Some scholars, such as Benford (2007), Smith (1998), and McCormick and McCormick (2006), have discussed how the current structure of intercollegiate athletics exploits the student portion of the term “student-athlete”. Further, they stated that athletic programs are overrepresented within universities’ decision-making narratives. This discourse stands in sharp contrast to that of other scholars, such as Hollbrook (2005), Smith (1988), and Benjamin (2004), who have argued that the intercollegiate athletic experience not only provides access to higher education for students who might not otherwise have access but also enhances the overall collegiate experiences of all students.

### **Revenue Sports as a “Front Porch”**

Toma and Kramer (2009) described the “marriage” of intercollegiate athletics, especially revenue-generating sports, and institutions of higher education, as an historic accident. This means that the inclusion of an entertainment entity within a primarily academically driven organization creates conflict within organizational missions.

However, universities have managed to integrate these commercialized activities, under the mask of intercollegiate athletics, into core functions at elite universities. In particular, college football has proven particularly useful through its ability to foster external relationships that attract resources to campus. These resources not only allow universities to maintain, but actually advance, the campus community and collegiate atmosphere. In an effort to classify the benefits of big-time college sports, Toma (2003) provided four strategic advantages that revenue-generating sports, particularly football, provide to academic institutions: institutional culture, brand and legitimacy, local connectivity, and institutional identity.

#### ***Institutional Culture and the “Collegiate Ideal”***

Higher education scholars have discussed the role of auxiliary institutions in the prestige-seeking behaviors of various colleges and universities. For athletics in a majority of universities, football allows for the expression of the collegiate ideal through the creation of a distinctive institutional culture and robust campus community that can be difficult to otherwise achieve on large campuses. Since its infancy, intercollegiate athletics have been used to balance growing campus enrollments with a need for students to feel connected to “their” institutions (Rudolph, 1990). Intercollegiate athletics serve as a mechanism to create and distribute norms, values, and beliefs that define a campus

culture (Toma, 2003). These norms and ideals are manifested through shared symbols, language, narratives, and practices.

These activities and shared values make institutions accessible and tangible. Through sports, members of the university community display their culture and unique forms: their colors, logos, and mascot (symbols); songs and slogans (language); stories, legends, and myths (narratives); and rituals and ceremonials (practices). Peterson and Spencer (1990) asserted that institutions have defined the campus culture experience for students through sports while finding a balance between that experience and economic gain. In doing so, football makes organizational culture more understandable and accessible. Universities can, thus, demonstrate how they differ from other institutions in ways that are appealing and accessible to those associated with them, highlighting qualities at the core of the collegiate ideal, such as an intimate community. Once again, this is not the result of planning, but instead of universities' using available, and needed, opportunities to their advantage.

### ***National Brand and Legitimacy***

Beyond being an important agent for fostering the continuance of an institutional culture, “big-time” college sports provide the opportunity to develop a national brand by adding distinctiveness and importance to campuses and legitimizing university prominence (Toma & Cross, 1998). Toma and Kramer (2009) stated that athletic programs may not be the first choice of university presidents as the mechanism for branding, but spectator sports are what distinguish otherwise indistinguishable large universities on a national level. When teams are successful or even appealing, football is the source of a national presence for large institutions—a standing that comes in few

other forms, if any, at all but a few institutions. Such notice lends legitimacy to a campus. Leveraging big-time college sports becomes an important opportunity for institutional leaders to increase their market share and competitiveness for students, as well as developing an important collegiate ideal (Harris, 2009).

### ***Local Involvement and Accessibility***

For non-academics and locals not directly invested in the daily operations of the institution, intercollegiate athletics makes sense. The accessibility of college sports, particularly revenue-generating sports, makes university operations accessible to a broader audience (Bruning et al., 2006; Toma & Kramer, 2009). To many outsiders, intercollegiate athletics are what is known and liked about colleges or universities. Sports engender a community-wide passion and support for the institution as a whole (Toma, 2003).

Beyond the local community, statewide political figures and legislators use intercollegiate athletics as their access to information on institutional performance. Humphreys (2006) found a direct link between institutional appropriations and support and the performance of college sports teams. Toma (2003) suggested that legislative decisions around institutional appropriations and support are made, in part, on Saturday afternoons in the fall. This ideology is confirmed by 93% of college presidents, who believe that an increase in athletic performance will garner an enhanced profile of their institution with local and elected officials (KCIA, 2009).

In totality, college sports provide a locus for the expression of pride central to the support of higher education. In fact, Toma (2003) argued that college sports (football, in particular) serve as a distraction from activities that can be difficult to justify as directly

relevant to the economic advancement of a state. Institutions build on such connections, quite purposefully, in external relations. Finally, intercollegiate athletics provide a vehicle through which to bring people on campus (Duderstadt, 2003). These might be prospective donors, key legislators invited to the president's box at the stadium, regular annual fund donors, or tuition-paying parents sitting in the stands or watching with interest on television -- those who otherwise would not have a direct means of connecting to the institutions that become a source of pride and even passion for them.

### **Additional Benefits of Intercollegiate Athletics**

Toma (2003) provided a framework through which to view themes related to the impact of intercollegiate athletics on collegiate experiences. The academic literature is rich with attempts to quantify the impact of athletic performance on various aspects of the postsecondary experience. Predominately, the literature focuses on the impact of student applications and admissions (Pope & Pope, 2009); however, some scholars have examined the impact of athletic performance on university-based revenue generation (Leeds & von Allmen, 2011), student connections to campus (Toma, 2003), and the public good (Clotfelter, 2011).

#### ***Student Admissions and Applications***

The largest body of academic inquiry focuses on the impact of intercollegiate athletics on student admissions, thereby connecting athletics to the academic core. A number of studies have illustrated that institutions hosting elite athletic programs (i.e., big-time sports) attract more and higher-quality students (Borland, Goff, & Pulsinelli, 1992; Murphy & Trandel, 1996). For example, these studies have connected major athletic conference membership, a loose definition of big-time sports, with increases in

student performance on the SAT, an increase in the number of applicants, and an increase in the level of revenue per student. The increase in the total number of applications has an indirect benefit on increasing admission selectivity and overall institutional prestige.

A major drawback of these studies is their reliance on cross-section and single-year data to make claims about the impact of intercollegiate athletics. With limited years of data, gauging whether the effect is due to increases in athletic performance or some other underlying factor is challenging. Additionally, the assumption that the athletic programs' situations within a given athletic conference constitute "big-time" sports is not supported (Leeds & von Allmen, 2011). The findings associated with the aforementioned studies could possibly reflect the impact of an institution's positionality within the marketplace rather than the prominence of its athletic program.

The academic literature includes a small number of studies that utilize more robust data sets. Pope and Pope (2009), along with Smith (2008), utilized multiple years (panel data) to estimate the impact of athletic success of student admission practices. Pope and Pope (2009) found that reaching the "Sweet 16" of the men's annual basketball tournament is associated with an 8% increase in student applications. They also found that completing the football season ranked within the "Top 10" increases student applications by 3%. They concluded that in addition to the increase in applicant pool, institutions associated with a winning football or basketball season experienced an increase in the SAT scores of the incoming class. In contrast to Pope and Pope (2009), Smith (2008) found that success in the NCAA's basketball tournament did not increase the number of applications and only marginally raised the SAT scores of incoming

students. These two competing sets of results create an opportunity for future studies on the connection between intercollegiate athletics and student admissions.

### ***Donation and External Support***

Alumni support of athletics constitutes about 20% of the total revenue for athletic departments (Clotfelter, 2011). With growing tensions over institutional subsidies and declining state appropriations, donations (along with media rights) has become an important source of new revenue. A recent survey of college presidents at elite institutions that sponsored athletic programs found that they feel intercollegiate athletics play a prominent role in the generation of university-based donations (KCIA, 2009). While presidential belief in the connection between athletics and donations is clear, the academic literature is less conclusive.

The vast majority of researchers who attempt to isolate the impact of athletics on donations use the case study approach (Leeds & von Allmen, 2011). This approach makes generalizing results to the entire population problematic and limiting. In an attempt to quantify the reality, Humphreys and Mondello (2007) found 320 institutions where donations to a given institution increased after participation in postseason play in both men's basketball and football. However, the donations that significantly increased were restricted in nature rather than open, unrestricted donations. However, Stinson and Howard (2007) found that academically elite institutions experienced more stable athletic giving when compared to their athletic peers that did not have the same academic reputations. This finding blurs the possible intersection of athletic performance, academic/cultural reputation, and external giving.

### ***Institutional Rankings***

Annual rankings of colleges and universities (such as the *U.S. News and World Report*) have become an important measure of institutional prestige and tool for college choice for prospective students (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). Clotfelter (2011) discussed the role of athletics in the development of student perceptions of satisfaction and quality, but found little evidence to support the theory that athletics-based performance increases perception of satisfaction. Beyond student-level satisfaction, a number of studies have attempted to connect “big-time” college sports to increases in academic rankings. In particular, Trenkamp (2007), Goidel and Hamilton (2006), and Lovaglia and Lucas (2005) concluded that academic rankings are positively and significantly affected by the sponsorship and success of intercollegiate athletic programs. In particular, Trenkamp (2007) found that football rankings (end-of-year rankings within the Associated Press poll) had a positive and significant effect on graduation rates and median SAT scores, whereas success in the NCAA men’s basketball tournament had a positive and significant impact on subjective academic rankings. Goidel and Hamilton (2006), in their analysis of universities within a single state, found that a significant number of residents made a connection between athletic success and academic quality. Residents with less education were even more likely to make this connection. These findings provide additional evidence that for local communications, athletics are the “front porch” for institutions. Finally, Lovaglia and Lucas (2005) concluded that there was a positive and significant relationship between high-visibility intercollegiate athletics and academic prestige.

### ***Impact of Underserved Populations***

Intercollegiate athletic programs appear to have additional influence over the postsecondary decision process for individuals who come from families with lower educational capital (Pope & Pope, 2006). Pope and Pope (2006) also found that African American students were roughly twice as likely to be influenced by NCAA Division I basketball success (14% increase, compared to 7% for non-African American prospective students). Moreover, African American and Hispanic students were more likely to be influenced by NCAA Division I football success, as males responded more favorably to basketball and football success, compared to females, and students who played high school sports were more influenced than their non-interscholastic participating peers.

These studies connecting athletic sponsorship and success highlight the presence of an important mechanism to diversifying the campus community. Given the increased emphasis by African American and male applicants, the utilization of athletic success to recruit these targeted populations could be useful for institutional leaders. The increased prevalence placed on access and support within the rankings further cements the connection between athletics and admissions-based practices.

### **Intercollegiate Athletic Decision Making Within the University**

The complexity of the American higher education system creates difficulties in normalizing the decision-making process (Clark & Youn, 1976). By nature, higher education institutions are vastly different and serve a variety of missions. This institutional differentiation creates organizational structures and cultures where decision making is both collegial, or relational, and bureaucratic, or political (Birnbaum, 1989).

Variations in the uses of institutional decision-making models makes the utilization of organizational theory imperative. In particular, Weick's (1976) classification of higher education systems as "loosely coupled" organizations provides a foundation for understanding the role of various entities within a university and their connectedness, either direct or indirect. The idea around coupling within an institution is directly related to the ability for the system (or within higher education departments or among individual actors) to respond to one another where the level of responsiveness is directly related to how tightly a system is coupled (Orton & Weick, 1990). For example, an institution where the faculty senate plays a prominent role in the governance of the athletic department is more tightly coupled than an institution where the athletic department is viewed as a free-standing auxiliary organization.

The semi-autonomous nature of athletic programs creates a unique fit within postsecondary institutions. The autonomous nature of "big-time" sports programs creates the perception that decision making is not limited to internal actors, but that external stakeholders exert power and influence over the process (Bok, 2003; Duderstadt, 2003; Estler & Nelson, 2004). Frey (1994) asserted that athletic departments are loosely coupled within an institution and, combined with the complexity of semi-autonomous governance, create a barrier to those stakeholders external to the athletic department in influencing athletic decision making. However, Borland et al. (2009) found that, despite the complexity and loosely coupled nature of athletics, decision making influences can come from either internal actors (ADs, institutional presidents/leaders, faculty senates, etc.) or external stakeholders (politicians, donors, coordinating boards, media, etc.).

The next step in understanding decision making within loosely coupled systems is an understanding of key actors, their roles, and their impact on the system (Weick, 1976). Through the identification of boundaries around specific events (for this study, athletic conference realignment) and elements to be “coupled,” such as specific institutional policies or access to revenue streams, scholars and policy makers can better understand the operations of an organization. Scholars (Lawrence & Ott, 2009; Duderstadt, 2000) have detailed the opinions and involvement of campus actors in intercollegiate athletic management. Next, this chapter delves deeper into the academic literature on the impact of various actors within athletics-based decisions. A discussion around their placement and influence will help to operationalize the loose coupling of athletic departments within institutions of higher education.

### **Key Actors in Athletic Management**

The predominant treatment of athletics within the academic literature centers on a reform-based discourse. Conversations on campus by university presidents, ADs, members of the faculty senate, and external constituents play a prominent role in athletic decision making. The autonomous nature of intercollegiate athletics creates individual campus-level differences in the power and influence of various actors, based on the coupling of departments.

Given that various stakeholders play a prominent role in influencing athletics decisions (Estler & Nelson, 2005), an understanding of their structural power and influence is important to gaining insight into the roles they play within athletics. Duderstadt (2003) identified the following stakeholder groups as the primary influencers of athletic policies: presidents, ADs, faculty, alumni, boosters, and the media. The strong

literature base and utilization of aspects from stakeholder theory frames the next section's discussion of the roles and influences of various actors on athletics decision making.

### ***College Presidents/Institutional Leaders***

Institutional presidents occupy a unique role in athletics-based decision making due to their management of both core academic functions and auxiliary enterprises, such as intercollegiate athletics. The complexity of operating the commercialized entities of academic institutions is often the topic of discussion for presidents after retirement. Four primary areas come to the fore when discussing the ambiguous nature of presidential leadership: ambiguity of purpose, power, experience, and success (Hoffman, 2013). These ambiguities create an environment where presidential leadership in higher education is characterized as organized anarchy in an environment where ambiguity is the norm (Cohen & March, 1986). While attending to multimillion-dollar athletic entities, which are more like a private corporation than an academic program (Duderstadt, 2000), university presidents are not armed with the organizational structure to effectively lead. In fact, Clotfelter (2011) stated, "Unlike armies and business corporations, which tend to have clear objectives and disciplined hierarchical command structures, universities feature vague missions, decentralized organization charts, and weak presidents" (p. 32).

Echoing some of the challenges associated with the institutional leadership of athletic programs, former institutional leaders of the University of Maryland, College Park (Lapchick & Slaughter, 1994), the University of Michigan (Duderstadt, 2000), the University of Connecticut and Michigan State University (DiBiaggio, 1991), and Princeton University (Shulman & Bowen, 2001) discussed the detrimental effect of athletics on the academic core and the escalation of controversy on college campuses.

Scholars have neglected to research the role of institutional leaders in the management of athletics. Due to this lack of empirical work, university presidents' first-hand narratives comprise the predominant thoughts and perspectives on the leadership of intercollegiate athletic programs. Estler and Nelson (2005) reviewed such narratives and identified three prominent themes. First is that isomorphism among athletic departments and individual sports has led to an unsustainable escalation in expenditures. Second, the increased commercialization and competitive landscape of intercollegiate athletic programs threatens the academic integrity of an academic institution. Third, combining the escalation of expenditures and the commercialization of college sports leads to concerns about student-athlete exploitation for their athletic abilities with little to no regard for their academic success.

A 2011 survey of college presidents (KCIA, 2011) regarding their feelings about intercollegiate athletics provides a more contemporary view of the perspectives of institutional leaders. The results of this study indicate that "presidents believe they have limited power to effect change on their own campuses regarding athletics financing and the larger problems it has created, much less for the FBS as a whole" (p. 7). Responding presidents identified increasing coaches' salaries, commercialization due to TV contracts and corporate interest, and facility construction and maintenance costs as primary concerns for the sustainability of the current athletic model. While expressing these concerns, some university presidents articulated that these problems can be relieved through increases in revenues. In particular, one university president was quoted as saying, "If you have a lucrative TV contract you want to protect that. Frankly, I would love to have twice the problems I have if it came with twice the revenue" (p. 16).

Presidents reiterated their feelings of powerlessness in making athletics-based decisions, but they recognized the importance of athletic programs and the need to generate additional athletics-based revenue. One president summarized the authority of intercollegiate athletics by stating, “TV is the key economic driver, and the revenues at stake there are hard to fight” (p. 19).

### ***University Faculty***

Decision making regarding a university’s academic core is heavily influenced by the faculty and its senate representatives (Eckel, 2000). Faculty authority and influence are entrenched at each level of an institution. However, faculty members have traditionally wielded much less influence over athletics-based decisions. In fact, faculty bodies have come together to advocate for athletic reform through the creation of the Drake Group and the Coalition for Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA). Faculty representatives from both of these groups advocate for the defense of “academic integrity in the face of commercialist sport” (Drake, 2004).

The stance of these groups creates a divide between faculty and intercollegiate athletics. Lawrence et al. (2009) found that faculty echoed beliefs similar to those of the college and university presidents, in that athletics are driven primarily by commercial and media actors. Despite their displeasure, and somewhat contrary to the Drake Group and COIA’s assertions, the faculty listed athletics as the second to last on a list of important priorities for faculty governance groups to consider, with Greek life’s being last (KCIA, 2007).

Unlike college presidents, who understand the importance of intercollegiate athletics, but feel powerless to enact change, faculty perceptions appear to be rooted in

their engagement with the athletic program. Specifically, “the more that faculty members know about governance matters, the less they perceive that athletics in-groups (such as boosters, the media, politicians) are able to exert strong power over decision-making, even after controlling for involvement in intercollegiate athletics governance” (Lawrence, 2009, p. 110). Overall, faculty members appear to lack knowledge about key athletics-based policies and are disengaged from the athletic process, which creates a negative perception between the academic core and athletic enterprise.

### ***Athletic Directors***

Within the current environment of intercollegiate athletics, ADs of Division 1-A programs operate as CEOs of a major private corporation. They possess competencies in a variety of business-minded principles, such as marketing, business development, financial management, and licensing (Duderstadt, 2000). They are charged with the primary duty of ensuring student-athlete academic success (Bailey & Littleton, 1991), but the realities of needing to navigate NCAA compliance, athletics-based human resource decisions, and the generation of new revenue streams leaves ADs with little time to focus on the success of individual student-athletes (Duderstadt, 2000). In fact, Massengale and Merriman (1985) stated that contemporary ADs’ responsibilities focus almost entirely on business concerns, as compared to university deans or academic leaders, who focus on academic progress and success. The past 40 years have seen a fundamental shift of ADs away from the academic side of the athletic enterprise, largely due to institutions’ needing “athletics departments to become more self-sufficient” (Thomas, 2010, p. 15).

In contrast to many of the reform initiatives around presidential control of athletics (Suggs, 2001), Thelin and Wiseman (1989) articulated that direct reporting of

ADs to university presidents creates tension between athletics and academics, as it creates an imbalance in access and reporting to institutional leaders. In particular, these researchers stated,

...by allowing a formal structure in which the athletic director reports directly to the president, the president tacitly agrees that the intercollegiate athletics program is more than an academic department—more than the biology or English departments, whose chairs report to a dean. Intercollegiate athletics is even more than an entire academic school whose dean reports to the vice president for academic affairs (p. 92).

### ***Alumni and Boosters***

The influence on athletic departmental decisions extends beyond the physical boundaries of a given campus. In describing the role of “passionate” alumni stakeholders, Duderstadt (2003) stated that these alumni undermine the “governance and hence integrity [of athletics] by putting excessive pressure on coaches, athletic directors, and even university presidents” (p. 250). Kjeldsen (1992) and Sperber (2000) emphasized the power of the alumni body to reprioritize athletics ahead of academic endeavors through political and economic pressures. Despite the scarce literature on the role of alumni in athletics-based decision making, researchers have discussed alumni’s innate belief that they can exert their influence over athletics-based decisions, even if they do not have the organizational legitimacy or authority to do so.

In contrast to the lack of literature on the role of alumni, the role of boosters (athletic and university) has received considerable attention by scholars. Sperber (2000) asserted that one way boosters achieve power and influence is related to their

economic/fiscal support of athletic programs through donations, season-ticket purchases, and capital project support. Frey (1982) discussed how political influence is a secondary mechanism by which boosters can attract power and articulated that these individuals “attract high-caliber athletes and coaches to a growing and successful athletic program. The college or university athletic program with a well-organized booster club of political and economic elite will survive” (p. 227). Boosters’ power, while articulated through economics and political theory, is also confirmed by university president opinions. The Knight Commission’s (2009) survey of college presidents found that institutional leaders experience intense pressure from boosters to support or reject policies that affect athletic success.

### ***Media***

The discourse around current television and media rights deals has brought to the forefront the important role media outlets play in athletics-based decisions. Access to additional media-based revenue appears to be a primary driver of decisions about athletic conference realignment. However, media attention to athletics also plays a significant role in publically branding an institution (Steinhardt, 2007; Woodward, 2007). Successful athletic performance leads to increased media coverage. This, in turn, creates additional opportunities for the reinforcement of institutional brands and the potential positive “halo effect” over an entire institution (Willihnganz, 2007).

The heightened attention the media generates around athletic performance and decisions enhances the discord between the academic core and athletic programs. This disconnect becomes evident to the public as notifications of athletic sanctions gain more exposure than the research and service generated by the academic faculty (Bailey &

Littleton, 1991). This scrutiny by the media generates a sense of influence over the institutional decisions, as media outlets play a prominent role in “help[ing] or hinder[ing] organizational objectives” (Phillips, 2003, p. 126).

### ***Bridging the Actors***

Hirko (2011) provided a useful framework for understanding the impact each factor has on the athletics decision-making process. In particular, Hirko (2011) borrowed from Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) when classifying the actual power and influence that each actor possesses. Both studies found that there are three distinct perceptions of influence: power, legitimacy, and urgency. Figure 1, below, provides an adaptation of Mitchell et al.’s (1997) classification of influence.

Hirko (2011) suggested that ADs are the only stakeholders with definitive power, as they have considerable influence over organizational decision making and possess all three perceptions of influence. University presidents and members of the media possess what is described as expectant influence, which is having a moderate influence in decision making while possessing two of the three attributes. Members of the faculty, along with boosters and alumni, have what Hirko classified as latent influence, which is a low level of influence in athletics-based decisions with only one attribute.

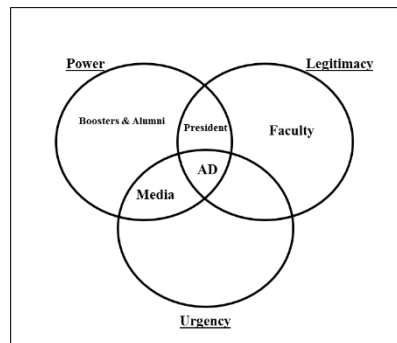


Figure 1. Hirko’s (2011) Power and Influence of Actors.

While actors' influence is classified into one of three categories, one must distinguish among sources of influence. For example, university presidents and media members are classified as having an expectant influence and presidential influences take the form of power and legitimacy, while members of the media exert their influence through power and urgency. This dichotomy between sources of influence for various actors speaks more to the culture and structural authorities within the higher education system.

### **The Organization of Big-Time Sports**

The recent escalation of big-time, revenue-generating and commercialized college sports has been a topic of heated debate (KCIA, 2011). With increased commercialization, questions have been raised regarding the governance of athletics and ways athletic programs are structurally held accountable. On a national scale, the NCAA has segmented these big-time, revenue-generating athletic programs into an isolated division: Division I-A or the FBS. Roach (2004) called the NCAA, the "nation's most powerful sports organization" (p. 26), while others have called the NCAA a cartel (Byers & Hammer, 1995; Fort, 2011). However, the primary mission of the NCAA is regulatory in nature (Clotfelter, 2010). The biggest barrier to evaluating its influence and effectiveness is the "fact that no single role fully captures the NCAA's behavior. Sometimes the NCAA acts like a high-minded guardian of academics, sometimes it acts like a profit-maximizing cartel, and sometimes it appears to be acting as both at once" (Leeds & von Allmen, 2011, p. 380).

In 1973, the NCAA adopted the current three-division organization of Division I, Division II, and Division III. With this adoption, only member institutions in Divisions I

and II can offer athletics-based scholarships to student-athletes for playing a sport. In 1978, Division I men's football was further delineated into I-A and I-AA (meaning the institutions that competed in Division II for all other sports besides football). In 2006, Divisions I-A and I-AA were renamed the FBS and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), respectively.

### ***Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)***

The FBS is part of the larger construction of competition through the NCAA. Conferences within the FBS represent the highest levels of competition, especially for football. As of 2012, there are 129 full members in Division I/FBS. Revenue for FBS schools in 2012 totaled \$6.9 billion, though only 23 programs reported a profit for the athletic department (AP, 2013). Postseason opportunities within the FBS consist of bowl games for teams that have been successful during the regular season. In fact, 70 of the 125 teams in the FBS conference participate in postseason bowl games – only needing a 6-6 record to qualify.

Conferences housed within the FBS are designated as either Automatic Qualifying (AQ) or Non-Automatic Qualifying (Non-AQ). The champion from each of the AQ conferences automatically qualify for participation in one of the five BCS bowl games. The BCS is a cluster of postseason games managed by the commissioners of each FBS conference along with the AD from University of Notre Dame. The BCS format includes the BCS national championship game, along with four other BCS bowl games. The most visible and prominent conferences are those within the BCS: Southeastern, Big Ten, Big-12, Big East, Pacific-12, and Atlantic Coast Conference. These athletic conferences play a vital role in the regulation of athletic departments, the coordination of

schedules, and the brokering of conference-wide revenue generation through media rights and sales. Conferences who qualify members for any of the BCS bowl games receive approximately \$23 million in postseason distributions (Smith, 2013). During the 2010-11 season, BCS paid out \$145.2 million to the six AQ conferences and \$24.7 to the non-AQ conferences. The discrepancy is largely due to the limited access non-AQ conference schools have to the most lucrative postseason bowl games.

At the start of the 2014 football season, the BCS computer rankings will no longer be used to select participants in the most elite bowl games within the FBS. As with other college sports, a playoff system will enable teams to compete for the national football championship. Division I-AA, or the FCS, has had a playoff system since its inception in 1979, which is comprised of a 24-team tournament (AP, 2012). In the 2014 season, the playoff system will be structured differently from that of the FCS conferences, and will include four teams, two semifinal games, and one championship game. While AQ status will no longer exist, institutions housed within AQ conferences will garner the greatest likelihood for accessing future playoff games (AP, 2012).

### ***Athletic Conferences***

Athletic historians generally agree that the beginning of the intercollegiate athletic conferences started with the Western Intercollegiate Athletic Conference in 1896 (Savage et al., 1929). Athletic conferences experienced significant expansion during the 1900s. In the landmark 1929 Savage Report, Savage et al. (1929) found that athletic conferences, particularly those containing the largest and most influential institutions, played important roles in the uniformity of admissions requirements and degree granting regulations as well as in the establishment of eligibility standards within athletic

competition. Competition rules were agreed upon democratically and enforcement and regulations occurred through the governing of faculty representatives from each member institution (Savage et al., 1929). Early athletic conferences mirrored that of academic collaborations (Rooney, 1976). The advent of the television and the increasing population shifted the role of athletic conferences.

From their proliferation in 1905 until the mid-1980s, athletic conferences' role centered around competition scheduling and rule making (Savage et al., 1929). Control of access to televised games, which gained prominence in the 1940s as television viewership increased, was centralized within the NCAA. However, on June 27, 1984, the Supreme Court ruled in *NCAA v. Board of Regent of Univ. of Oklahoma* that the control of television and media rights by the NCAA was a violation of antitrust laws. This ruling allowed schools and conferences to negotiate individual television contracts. While all but two conferences – the Pacific-10 Conferences and Big Ten Conferences – opted to jointly negotiate their television rights, the results of the 1984 ruling was a shift in duties for athletic conferences.

Despite the ability to negotiate media rates, Shuman and Bowen (2001) stated that athletic conferences still remain as “companion entities to the NCAA” (p. 16), suggesting that regulation and compliance are at the forefront of the conferences' missions. Athletic conferences have historically been characterized by long-term stability in membership and typically assist in establishing rules for fair athletic play, provide a unified voice for the leadership of each of the member institutions, and serve as a liaison to external constituents (Covell & Barr, 2010; Duderstadt, 2003). Despite these characteristics, Duderstadt (2003) asserted that there is no clear definition of the role of athletic

conferences, which may indicate that some conferences fulfill these roles better than others. The differentiation in the ability for athletic conferences to negotiate television contracts created a tiered system of athletic conferences, which was not present prior to 1984 and further clouded the ways athletic conferences approached their roles.

### ***Athletic Conference Realignment***

The tiered system of athletic conferences has created incentives for institutions to move to more prestigious conferences as they look to expand their institutional and athletic reputation. The recent college realignments had antecedents in a smaller realignment in 2004 when University of Miami and Virginia Tech University left the Big East to join the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). The stated reason for the 2004 conference realignment was a desire to increase the proximity to their geographic rivals. Boston College followed suit in 2005 and posited a different rationale for engaging in conference realignment. Boston College's president said at the time, "The move to the ACC will generate greater revenues in the future" (USA Today, 2003). This move started a small wave of changes in institutional membership, as the Big East wanted to fill the three spaces vacated. It did so through the invitation of the University of Louisville and University of Cincinnati to join. Both left Conference USA to join the Big East, causing Conference USA to add two additional members (UL, 2003).

After the moves in 2004 and 2005, conference realignment remained sparse for the better part of four years. However, the most recent wave of athletic conference realignment began with the Big Ten Conference's approving the University of Nebraska as its 12th member. This started a chain of realignments where the Big Ten added Rutgers University and the University of Maryland. The Pacific-10 (now Pacific-12)

Conference responded but was unsuccessful with programs such as Oklahoma and Oklahoma State as well as Texas, Texas Tech, and Texas A&M (Schad, Katz, & Trotter, 2011). Nevertheless, Pacific-10 was eventually able to expand membership to the University of Colorado and the University of Utah. These moves created an expanded media footprint for the Pacific-10 and increased its negotiating power for future television contracts. The Pacific-10 expansion from 10 to 12 teams created openings in the Mountain West and the Big-12, thus continuing the domino effect of conference movements.

### ***Impact of Conference Realignment***

Conferences look to structure themselves with competitive balance in mind because such balance helps to increase demand due to the uncertainty of contest outcomes (Dittmore & Crow, 2010; Perline & Stoldt, 2007). When competitive balance is not achieved, such imbalance can lead to “churning,” or mobility from those historically positioned at the top or bottom of the conference standings from one conference to another (Quirk, 2004; Rhoads, 2004). Weiner (2011) stated that athletic conference realignment offers institutions the potential benefits of increasing television revenues, gaining access to additional bowl games, and achieving larger postseason payouts. When asked, university presidents stated they have learned “nothing raises a school’s profile, attracts out-of-state students and rallies alumni like a winning football team” (Bachman, 2011).

Recently, scholars have become interested in identifying the impact of athletic conference realignment. In particular, Price and Sen (2003) discussed the added value derived from a conference association and its institutional membership. Groza (2010)

built on the work of Price and Sen (2003) and attributed a portion of this added value to increasing competitive balance, game day attendance, and fan support. Groza asserted that the movement away from a given conference may have negative impacts on the prior conference in terms of not only revenue generation but also the conference's ability to attract additional institutional members. Also, institutions experienced an increased academic profile by strategically selecting a new conference of institutions that serve similar academic niche markets (Perline & Stoldt, 2007).

Economically, conference realignment is associated with an increased ability to negotiate better bowl game contracts (Groza, 2010) and more expansive television broadcast agreements (Nwosu, 2012). Specifically, McEvoy (2013) found that membership in the AQ Conference was worth an additional \$24.4 million in annual revenue to an institution. Groza (2010) further linked athletic conference realignment to increases in attendance and ticket sales revenue. Nwosu (2012) cautioned institutions about this potential increased investment since realignment is almost always associated with upward movement in prestige and competition. However, Nwosu concluded that generated revenues far outpaced necessary increases in expenditures.

Finally, scholars have identified the non-economic impacts of athletic conference realignment. Post realignment conferences, and their individual members, increased their overall visibility and notoriety (Groza, 2010; Sweitzer, 2009) as well as increased their athletic profile (Groza, 2010, Price & Sen, 2003; Quirk, 2004). Not all impacts of the realignment have been positive. In speaking of the recent moves to add the University of Maryland and Rutgers University to the Big Ten Conference, Silver (2012) stated that the conference appeared "to reduce both the geographical integrity of the conference and the

quality of the average Big Ten football game” (p. B13). Nwosu (2012) also raised concerns regarding the geographic proximity and the potential to alienate an established strong local alumni base.

Recent work on the institutional impact of athletic conference realignment is mixed. Institutions experienced economic and non-economic benefits; however, concerns around travel and geographical proximity remain. Scholars (Groza, 2010, Price & Sen, 2003; Quirk, 2004; Sweitzer, 2009) have all cautioned that conference realignment has the potential to produce both academic and athletic impacts. Nwosu (2012) articulated that while institutions consider the broad spectrum of pros and cons, economic and political benefits take priority when deciding to realign athletic conferences.

In addition to understanding the role of athletic conferences in the management and housing of athletic programs, one must also understand the role of intercollegiate athletic departments within contemporary postsecondary institutions and the organizational structure and position of intercollegiate athletics. Most athletic departments, particularly at the Division I-A level, operate as independent auxiliary enterprises. This means there is little direct oversight from academic administrators on a day-to-day basis (Toma, 2003). In fact, many athletic departments, in an effort to maximize revenues, have developed into private corporations or foundations. Fish (2009) found that within the Southeastern Conference, eight of the twelve institutions at the time had an affiliated nonprofit athletic association with the entirety of athletic money flowing through those nonprofits. Fish stated that this “provides autonomy that allows many key arrangements to be made apart from the faculty or administration” (p. 1).

### *Models of Housing Athletics*

While the structure of the NCAA and its management of conferences and athletic departments are hierarchical, the governance of postsecondary institutions is complex and relies on relationship building within a social institution (Duderstadt, 2001; Karol, 1980). At most institutions of higher education, a president or chancellor is given the authority to set the most appropriate organizational or reporting structuring for that institution (Cohen & March, 1974). The formalization of these reporting structures is often housed within an organizational chart. These important formalizing mechanisms dictate communication and reporting channels within an organization and delineate roles and responsibilities (Karol, 1980; Millet, 1980; Mintzberg, 1983). However, Mintzberg (1983) found that institutions of higher education are complex and that informal coalitions and power structures are present. In particular, Mintzberg stated, “Every organization has important power and communication relationships that are not put down on paper” (p. 19).

The complexities of institutional management are not lost on the way higher education positions intercollegiate athletics. The positioning of intercollegiate athletics on the organizational chart is unique to each institution. Some institutions have fully integrated their athletic departments into student life departments (e.g., Vanderbilt University), while others have two separate athletic departments for men’s and women’s sports (e.g., the University of Tennessee). Amid the varying models of athletic reporting, Massengale and Merriman (1985) outlined two general approaches that institutions take in structuring their athletic reporting. The first is a disjointed model where an athletic

department does not function like a traditional academic department. Athletic departments within this model are viewed almost entirely as auxiliary or commercial enterprises and serve the purpose of being the institution's "front porch," a term coined by Suggs (2011), or marketing arm. The rationale of utilizing such an approach to organizing intercollegiate athletic activities is as follows:

Because an independent athletics department represents a sizable investment and has extensive potential benefits, it seems prudent that its administrative structure be as efficient and as effective as possible. Even a cursory examination of administrative flow charts illustrates that placing athletics under another department compounds the bureaucratic structure.... One can only speculate at what provides the motivation for using such structures. Perhaps it is nothing more than tradition. Or, on closer examination it may be that chief administrators, because of the controversy that often surrounds college athletics, are reluctant to assume the direct control of collegiate athletic programs and prefer the creation of a buffer (Massengale & Merriman, 1985, p. 191).

In contrast to the disjointed and commercialized model presented above, Massengale and Merriman (1985) also described an integrated or affiliated model for athletic structuring. This integrated model has a reporting structure where athletic staff members report through traditional academic channels, athletic coaches and staff members hold advanced academic degrees, and athletic decisions are part of the academic community. This is an arrangement that "features teachers/coaches who view intercollegiate athletics as an educational service for students and society and not a profit

motive corporate business enterprise with economic growth as its top priority” (1985, p. 192).

While Massengale and Merriman (1985) described both approaches, they concluded that given the commercialized nature of “big-time” college sports and the collegial environment of the academic core, the differences within athletics and academics also rest with the level of centralization, as athletic departments operate under a more centralized decision-making framework, and university administrators have little influence on departmental decisions. Massengale and Merriman asserted that because of these differences, the complete separation of academics and athletics is justified and oftentimes beneficial. The authors did suggest that institutions create a linkage between academics and athletics through designated university liaisons who understand both higher education and the management of intercollegiate athletics.

Frey (1985) also investigated the structuring of athletic departments within postsecondary institutions, but postulated a different conclusion. Frey framed his view of athletic departments through an applied anomie theory to quantify athletic departments as a “case of organizational deviance within the college or university” (p.110).

Organizational deviance is defined as “a situation where there is a violation of normative expectations surrounding the organization and this behavior has peer and elite support, conditions which facilitate group rule-breaking and the adoption of goals inconsistent with societal values” (p. 110). The underlying assumption of this theory is that rule breaking or norm non-conformity is a mechanism for achieving institutional goals. Frey observed a relationship between athletic departments and academic institutions that prioritized developing “strong links to external constituencies (boosters) to resist control

by internal university mechanisms” (p. 110). This prioritization results in increases in institutional notoriety, the attraction of additional students, and connection with alumni and boosters, yielding economic returns for a given institution. Frey (1985) contended that the organization of athletics, combined with external control structures, fosters a culture of deviance. This culture becomes an institutional strategy for coping with external pressures to win and the self-regulating nature of most big-time college athletic departments. Frey argued that these actions “are justified as necessary to maintain a high competitive level in the face of declining or limited resources from accepted, institutionalized sources such as gate receipts and legislative appropriations” (p. 113).

Unlike Massengale and Merriman (1985), Frey (1985) used the seminal work of Cohen (1981) and his discussions of loosely coupled structures within academic institutions. Frey (1985) asserted that the generated athletics-based revenues and the informal nature of presidential governances perpetuate a culture of deviance and lead to the continuation of athletic scandals and the escalation of expenditures. This structure creates an “athletic subculture [where] ‘normative cheating’ strategies [are] critical to achieving the goals of winning and are brought on by stresses that accompany the goal” (p. 110).

From an organizational perspective, competing ideologies exist regarding the positioning of intercollegiate athletics and their impact on organizational culture and action. However, both Frey (1985) and Massengale and Merriman (1985) agreed that the level of direct institutional control (i.e., presidents or chancellors) affects the consideration given to academic benefits within athletics-based decisions. Both researchers also contend that the cultural entrenchment of athletic leaders or cultures

affects the autonomy given within athletics-based decisions. They also agreed that external pressures have escalated and continue to grow in prominence within the athletic decision-making process.

### **Summary**

The potential benefits of intercollegiate athletics on institutional reputation and prestige are a topic of much research. Results from previous studies have yet to provide concrete empirical evidence on the impact of athletic positioning on economic or non-economic institutional outcomes. The academic literature about the power and influence of athletics has provided an important foundation for analyzing the impact of various actors in making athletics-based decisions. Additionally, studies articulated the role of economic and institutional priorities. Using the stakeholder theory to frame the loosely coupled nature of institutional governance in intercollegiate athletics provides a useful framework for quantifying the interactions between actors and the organizational governance structure.

In building on the primary research question outlined in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 provided a synthesis of the academic literature about athletic conference realignment, the benefits of the college sports, and the process and actors involved in athletic-based decisions. The next chapter, Chapter 3, discusses the analytical approach implemented to answer the research questions, while Chapter 4 presents the case study data. Chapter 5 discusses the findings within the context of the blended conceptual framework, examines the practical and policy-based implications of the findings, and presents potential areas for future research and attention.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS AND DATA**

The following chapter discusses the methods used to answer the research questions guiding this study. The methodological discussion centers on the benefits of qualitative inquiry, the case study approach, the primary research questions, the role of the researcher, and the data collection sites and procedures. This chapter concludes by addressing this study's data analysis methods, trustworthiness, and limitations.

Understanding the factors influencing the decision-making process surrounding athletics conference realignment is an understudied area of higher education. The lack of systematic and historical reporting of athletics-based financial and human resource data currently limits the use of causal quantitative analyses to examine this important phenomenon. Additionally, the use of a qualitative design provides the opportunity to examine the roles of key institutional leaders, both athletic and academic, in making conference realignment decisions. As noted, the research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- RQ1: What are the primary factors affecting athletic conference realignment?
- RQ2: What roles do various academic and institutional leaders play in broad-based athletic decisions about athletic conference membership?
- RQ3: How do key concepts of resource dependence theory, institutional theory, and principal-agent theory explain athletic conference realignment at Division I-A institutions?

Depth of understanding and richness of data are the core principles of qualitative

research. The lack of systematic quantitative data and the nature of the primary research questions lent themselves to a study that is primarily interested in the meaning by which people construct their thoughts and ideas around a central topic (Merriam, 1998). To answer the research questions for this study, I entered the field and collected data first hand from athletic and academic leaders from three selected institutions. Gathering data from multiple sources provided me with the flexibility to understand the potential institutional determinants and roles of key actors in athletic conference realignments.

### **Case-Study Approach**

In 2013, over 300 athletic programs were operating in the NCAA’s Division I-A (FBS) or Division I-AA (FCS). While not all of these institutions were subject to the athletic conference realignment, 59 distinct institutions changed their athletic conference membership between 2004 and 2014. Table 1 illustrates the athletic conference realignments from 2004 to 2014. In total, 61 realignments occurred. Of the 61 realignments that have occurred since 2004, 14 (23%) were schools realigning from a non-AQ to an AQ conference. Sixteen (26%) realignments were institutions transitioning between two AQ conferences. The largest number of realignments, 30 (50%), were institutions transitioning between two non-AQ conferences. Only one realignment – Temple in 2005 – downgraded from an AQ conference to a non-AQ independent conference status. This indicates that when institutions realign conferences, they do so either laterally or with upward mobility in mind.

*Table 1: FBS Conference Realignment (2004–2014)*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Team</b>	<b>Prior Conference</b>	<b>New Conference</b>
2004	Miami (FL)	Big East	ACC
2004	Virginia Tech	Big East	ACC

2004	Connecticut	Independent	Big East
2004	Troy	Independent	Sun Belt
2004	Florida Atlantic	FCS	Independent FBS
2005	Boston College	Big East	ACC
2005	South Florida	Conference USA	Big East
2005	Louisville	Conference USA	Big East
2005	Cincinnati	Conference USA	Big East
2005	Temple	Big East	Independent
2005	Florida International	FCS	Sun Belt
2005	Florida Atlantic	Independent	Sun Belt
2005	New Mexico St.	Sun Belt	WAC
2005	Idaho	Sun Belt	WAC
2005	Utah State	Sun Belt	WAC
2005	Tulsa	WAC	Conference USA
2005	Southern Methodist	WAC	Conference USA
2005	Rice	WAC	Conference USA
2005	UTEP	WAC	Conference USA
2005	UCF	WAC	Conference USA
2005	Marshall	WAC	Conference USA
2005	Texas Christian	WAC	MWC
2007	Temple	Independent	MAC
2008	Western Kentucky	FCS	Independent
2009	Western Kentucky	Independent	Sun Belt
2011	Colorado	Big 12	Pac-10
2011	Utah	MWC	Pac-10
2011	Nebraska	Big 12	Big 10
2011	BYU	MWC	Independent
2012	South Alabama	FCS	Sun Belt
2012	UTSA	FCS	WAC
2012	Texas State	FCS	WAC
2012	Massachusetts	FCS	MAC
2012	Hawaii	WAC	MWC
2012	Fresno State	WAC	MWC
2012	Nevada	WAC	MWC
2012	TCU	MWC	Big 12
2012	Texas A&M	Big 12	SEC
2012	Missouri	Big 12	SEC
2012	Temple	MWC	Big East
2012	West Virginia	Big East	Big 12
2013	Georgia State	FCS	Sun Belt
2013	Syracuse	Big East	ACC
2013	Pittsburgh	Big East	ACC
2013	San Diego State	MWC	Big East
2013	Boise State	MWC	Big East
2013	Houston	Conference USA	Big East
2013	Memphis	Conference USA	Big East

2013	UCF	Conference USA	Big East
2013	SMU	Conference USA	Big East
2013	Florida International	Sun Belt	Conference USA
2013	North Texas	Sun Belt	Conference USA
2013	Utah State	WAC	MWC
2014	Maryland	ACC	Big 10
2014	Rutgers	Big East	Big 10
2014	Florida Atlantic	Sun Belt	Conference USA
2014	Tulane	Conference USA	Big East
2014	East Carolina	Conference USA	Big East
2014	Middle Tennessee	Sun Belt	Conference USA
2014	Louisville	Big East	ACC

To achieve depth in data and inquiry, a researcher must limit the study's sample. According to Merriam (1998), a researcher employs the case study methodology, one of the core techniques used in qualitative research, when the primary aim of the research study is a deep and full understanding of a topic or phenomenon. Qualitative research often includes the collection of data from multiple sources. While interviews served as the primary instrument for data collection, I also used data from news media coverage and public documents to triangulate the interview data. Finally, a nationally representative survey helped to further generalize the results to the broader FBS realignment environment.

For several reasons, the case study method was the most appropriate for this study. First, given the nature of institutional decision making, this method provided insight to guide future research, practice, and potential policy (Merriam, 1998). Second, Yin (2003) discussed the power the case study approach has to explain the "why" and "how" of research questions. Case studies provide the most appropriate approach when researching topics where the principal investigator has little or no control over the events. This is especially true when the phenomenon is contemporary and exists in a real-world

setting (Yin, 2003). The case study approach is also appropriate when the research is guided by a theoretical construction, and the researcher needs multiple sources of data/evidence (Yin, 2003).

In particular, this study utilized a comparative case study design to analyze athletic conference realignment. Yin (2003) stated that the comparative case design increases the trustworthiness of the findings by deriving evidence from multiple cases. Data extracted from multiple cases provide more compelling and robust findings, as compared to the traditional single-case design (Yin, 2003). The unit of analysis for this study was individual institutions with institutional roles (e.g., president and AD) serving as the focal point for understanding roles and influences. Yin (2003) stated that “analytical conclusions independently arising from two cases will be more powerful than those coming from a single case and the contexts of the two cases are likely to differ to some extent” (p. 53). This is particularly poignant when commonalities can be found across each of the three sites, thus helping to extend external validity and the replication of logic.

The qualitative design of this study allowed me to address the complexity of the decision-making process around athletic conference realignment by providing a greater understanding of the factors and actors within each of the institutions and their decision-making processes. This research provided an understanding of the role institutional leaders play in intercollegiate athletic decision making. By means of a descriptive and analytical case study approach, I obtained rich information on the commonalities and variations among different athletic conference memberships and realignment processes. The study stands to make a valuable contribution to the literature through a more in-depth

understanding of athletic conference realignment, the role of key institutional actors in the decision-making process, and the factors that affect athletic conference realignment.

### **Case Study Sites**

To select the most meaningful case study sites, I performed a document analysis of public records, thus garnering an accurate initial list of institutions that recently engaged in athletic conference realignment. Next, I purposefully selected a single institution from each of three different realignment types. Finally, I selected institutions based on personal knowledge of intercollegiate athletic departments, the decision-making process, and institutional type. I engaged in conversations with a group of scholars and athletic practitioners to assist with the final selection of the case sites. After I selected each site, I obtained permission from institutional leaders to interview participants. Creswell (2008) and Patton (2002) discussed the importance of selecting case study sites that provide “information rich,” illuminative, and useful indicators of the decision-making process. I used purposeful selection to identify the sites included in this study to improve the understanding of the athletic conference realignment process, the factors affecting the decision to switch, and the role of various institutional leaders in the decision-making process. An important premise of the study was “replication logic” (Yin, 2003), with each institution’s serving as an independent test of how the conceptual framework informs the athletic conference’s realignment process.

In an effort to identify the primary institutional factors associated with athletic conference realignment, along with the roles of various institutional leaders in this athletics-based decision, I examined three NCAA Division I institutions. Each of these institutions experienced an athletic conference membership switch in one of three moves:

1) non-automatic qualifying FBS conference to another non-automatic qualifying FBS conference (“Non-AQ to Non-AQ”), 2) non-automatic qualifying FBS conference to an automatic qualifying FBS conference (“Non-AQ to AQ”), or 3) automatic qualifying FBS conference to another automatic qualifying FBS conference (“AQ to AQ”).

Selecting realignment sites that capture each of the three different realignment types was important, given the complexities associated with each of the types. As discussed in Chapter 2, AQ conferences include the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big East Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pacific-10 Conference, and Southeastern Conference. The University of Notre Dame is an independent football program that is included with AQ institutions, even though the institution must reach certain qualifications to be eligible for BCS bowl consideration. Non-AQ conferences include Conference USA, the Mid-American Conference, the Mountain West Conference, the Sun Belt Conference, and the Western Athletic Conference. Members of AQ conferences have football programs that compete for spots in the coveted and, most importantly, profitable, BCS bowl games, while non-AQ institutions battle for at-large spots in BCS bowl games. Percentile evidence completed by Fulks (2009) shows the differences in revenues by conference membership. The spending gap between these two cohorts has also been recognized by the Knight Commission, in its study regarding competitive balance and expenditures at the NCAA Division I level. The Knight Commission (2009) produced similar results regarding the gap between AQ and non-AQ conferences:

The wide gap between wealthy conferences and struggling conferences is growing wider, deepening a class structure even within the ostensible *big time*. Among the

eleven conferences with teams in the bowl subdivision, the richest league's members generated approximately fourteen times as much revenue as those programs in the poorest conferences in 2007, according to data provided by the NCAA (Knight Commission, 2009, p. 3).

After identifying the type of athletic conference realignment for each institution, I retained only institutions that experienced conference realignment between 2011 and 2013. The limitation of the sample to realignment within the past three years was purposeful and done to ensure accuracy in recollection during the interview process and appropriateness of document analysis. Limiting the sample also ensured that institutions going through realignment experienced similar economic and social pressures occurring within higher education. To generate the final sample, I followed the sample techniques Yin (1994) articulated to maximize the variation across case sites and realignment types. The maximum variation approach is an attempt to create a sample to identify a set of cases that, despite having a diverse set of norms and practices, could exhibit common patterns that cut across variations. Within this study, the variation was the type of conference realignment in which the institution was engaged.

#### ***Florida International University: Non-AQ to Non-AQ Realignment***

Florida International University (FIU) is a public research university located in a large urban city within the southeast. FIU is part of the larger state university system. Compared to the other two institutions within this sample, FIU is a young institution, having being established in 1965. FIU has a current student population of greater than 50,000 and offers more than 280 undergraduate majors and 125 graduate degrees across 23 academic schools. FIU is a commuter-based campus with a large proportion of the

student population considered part time.

As a young institution, FIU does not have a rich tradition of intercollegiate athletic sponsorship. FIU has more than 400 student-athletes competing in 18 varsity sports, including seven men's and 11 women's programs. As a Division I member, FIU's athletic teams boast 42 NCAA postseason tournament appearances and 102 All-America honors over the past three decades. Between 2010 and 2011, FIU programs earned conference championships in football, baseball, women's soccer, and women's tennis. In addition, the football team participated in back-to-back bowl games in 2010 and 2011. FIU boasts its own on-campus football stadium, Alfonso Field at FIU Stadium, which was renovated in 2008 and expanded to 20,000 seats in 2012. U.S. Century Bank Arena is home to FIU men's and women's basketball and volleyball. In January 2012, FIU finished nearly \$10 million in renovations and enhancements to its basketball arena.

***Southern Methodist University: Non-AQ to AQ Realignment***

This institution experienced athletic conference realignment from a non-BCS to a BCS conference. Southern Methodist University (SMU) is a nationally ranked private institution, enrolling approximately 11,000 undergraduate and graduate students. SMU provides a strong foundation in the humanities and sciences, along with professional and graduate programs through seven degree-granting schools. Presently, SMU is nonsectarian in its teaching and committed to academic freedom and open inquiry, but has a historical connection to religious and community groups.

SMU has a long and rich history of intercollegiate athletic participation at the Division I level. SMU's football team has won three national championships, exhibited continued national prominence within men's soccer and golf, and has achieved success in

men's and women's basketball. From 1918 to 1996, SMU was a member of the athletically elite Southwest Conference, until it formally disbanded. SMU subsequently joined another athletic conference in 2005, which was not included as a member of an AQ conference within the BCS structure. In 2013, SMU formally accepted an invitation to join an AQ athletic conference.

### ***University of Missouri: AQ to AQ Conference Realignment***

The University of Missouri is a large public research-intensive university, designated as a land-grant institution, located near the large metropolitan area of St. Louis. The university was the first public institution of higher education established west of the Mississippi River. As the state's largest institution, the University of Missouri enrolled over 34,000 students in 20 academic colleges. The university is one of six public universities that support a law school, medical school, and a veterinary medicine school on the same campus. The University of Missouri is a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities and is considered its state flagship university.

The intercollegiate athletic program at the University of Missouri is well established. Missouri currently sponsors 18 varsity teams with eight male and 10 female teams, all competing at the Division I level. Prior to 2012, the University of Missouri remained in the Big-12 Conference since its inception in 1907; it was a founding member of the conference when it was called the Big-8. The men's basketball team has made it to the NCAA Tournament five straight seasons (2009-2013) and 24 times overall. Missouri's football team has been to post-season bowl games for six straight years and 28 times overall. The softball team has participated in the College World Series each of the last three seasons (2009-2011). Missouri has won Big-12 Championships in men's

basketball, soccer, and softball. Its football team is the only Division I-A FBS program in the state.

### ***Overview of Athletic and Institutional Characteristics***

Table 2 provides a summary of key institutional and athletic indicators as well as the FBS median value for reference. Both the University of Missouri (UM) and Florida International University (FIU) have larger enrollments than the FBS median and are near the median value with the proportion of students at the undergraduate level. Southern Methodist University (SMU) has a smaller and more graduate-level student body. FIU has a significantly larger proportion of minority students, whereas both UM and SMU fall below the FBS median for minority student enrollment.

Athletically, UM spends more than the FBS median per athlete, but possesses lower than the median FBS debt level. FIU athletics demonstrate the inverse relationship where they spent less per athlete, but have a larger amount of debt – a possible indicator of FIU’s desire to increase its athletic prestige. Athletic finance data is not publicly available for SMU, as it is a private institution and not required to respond to inquiries.

Table 2: Summary of Athletic and Academic Characteristics

	<b>University of Missouri</b>	<b>Southern Methodist University</b>	<b>Florida International University</b>	<b>Division I-A / FBS Median</b>
<b><i>Academic and Campus Characteristics</i></b>				
Institutional Size (FTE)	31,970	9,390	36,376	27,453
Instructional Spending per FTE (\$)	\$10,633	\$14,261	\$6,566	\$11,353
Minority Student Enrollment (%)	22.0%	37.0%	87.0%	41.5%
Undergraduate Students (%)	77.7%	57.4%	81.2%	76.8%
Carnegie Classification	Doctoral/Research Universities:	Doctoral/Research Universities:	Doctoral/Research Universities:	N/A

	Extensive	Extensive	Extensive	
Geographic Region	Plains	Southwest	Southeast	N/A
<b><i>Athletic-based Information</i></b>				
Sport Sponsored	16	16	13	15
Athletic Spending Per Athlete (\$)	\$128,316	N/A	\$75,979	\$104,638
Total Athletic Facility Debt (\$)	\$25,312,268	N/A	\$33,385,910	\$39,155,000
Total National Championships	2	4	0	N/A
Previous Conference	Big-12 Conference	Conference USA	Sun Belt Conference	N/A
New Conference	Southeastern Conference	Big East / New American	Conference USA	N/A

*Note: Academic and campus characteristics are derived from the IPEDS database and from the 2011-12 academic year. Athletic-based data is derived from the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics from the same year. Athletic finance data for Southern Methodist University is not available as they are not subjected to the public reporting of athletic finances.*

### **Participant Selection**

After selecting the three sites of inquiry, I then selected participants from each institution to include for potential interviews. In contrast to quantitative research, in which participants are ideally randomly selected to ensure generalizability of conclusions to the larger population, qualitative research is not concerned with overarching generalizations, focusing rather on understanding the experiences of the participants to inform the aims of the study.

As the primary objective of this study was to gain a complete understanding of the factors influencing conference realignment, I needed to select participants intimately involved in the decision-making process. To this end, I approached only individuals who had a perceived or direct impact on the athletic conference realignment process for possible interviews. These included the institutions' presidents, board of trustees, ADs, senior academic and student life administrators, and faculty and student leaders. Patton

(1990), however, suggested using maximum variation sampling within qualitative research, or, the selection of participants whose experiences are unique in some way. This approach provides credence to common themes across individuals, despite their unique perspectives. For this study, specifically, examples were provided across athletic, academic, and administrative perspectives. The variety of perspectives led to a thorough understanding of the factors influencing athletic conference realignment and the role of institutional actors.

In addition to identifying unique perspectives across participants, this study utilized a combined purposeful sample technique (Patton, 1990). This technique combined multiple approaches to obtain a rigorous and defensible sampling. First, this study's sample criteria required the participants to be members of the senior leadership of the university and to be involved in athletics-based conference realignment. Using a variety of background information, as well as media sources, I compiled a list of potential individuals at each institution who held senior-leadership positions within the academic and athletic enterprises and potentially played an important role in the athletic conference realignment decision-making process. After compiling a list of potential participants, I then approached representatives of each prospective institution (either academic or athletic) to gain access to the institution and the list of individuals. I made contact with the institution's representative through email with a follow-up by phone to gain approval. Through ongoing communication with senior-level contacts at each institution, I secured access to the requested list of participants with knowledge of the athletic conference realignment process. At each case site, I contacted potential participants through email, which included the confirmation letter from the institutional leader. Two of the three

institutions provided access to the entire list of participants as well as access to additional individuals, if needed. One site provided access to only the individuals listed within the initially requested list.

Across all three case studies, I contacted 52 prospective interviewees to participate. These contacts included requests to senior leaders within academic affairs, student life, athletic departments, and the faculty athletics council or faculty senate. Of the 52 initial requests for interviews, 34 agreed to participate. Twelve of the 18 individuals that declined to participate declined due to a lack of involvement in the athletic conference realignment. Members of the student life divisions, academic affairs, and the faculty exhibited the highest refusal rate due to their lack of participation. Five of the remaining six refusals were due to scheduling concerns, and one individual was unresponsive. Two individuals stated they had limited involvement with the recent athletic conference realignment, but provided contact information for a colleague whom they believed would provide insight into the process. This secondary “snowball” sampling (Creswell, 2008) yielded the final two interviews for this study, 34 in total. The sample parameters at SMU yielded no refusals. Ten of the 18 refusals were from FIU, and the remaining eight were at the University of Missouri.

### **Data Collection Methods**

To gain a holistic understanding of the institutional determinants of athletic conference realignment, I employed three methods of data collection. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that qualitative researchers collect information and data until they reach saturation, where new information overlaps with previously collected data and provides little to no additional insight. In an attempt to achieve information saturation,

the primary method of data collection was face-to-face semi-structured interviews. In addition to interviews with university and athletic leaders, I also obtained data from reviewing publically available documents and field notes of the campus culture, athletic department operations, and institutional decision-making processes at each of the three institutional sites. Finally, participants completed an online survey (see Appendix C) that was used to aggregate data based primarily on a rank order of the primary determinants and roles of various stakeholders in the decision-making process. When combined, the three data collection methods provided an in-depth look into the institutional determinants of athletic conference realignment in this study (Creswell, 2009).

Consistency of results within this study occurred through the noticeable overlap in the data and responses to the interview protocol. Each of the three sites produced consistent results across participants on both common factors and the role of campus actors during conference realignment. After the consistency of results was evident, I identified themes and subthemes from the interview transcripts and used them to create larger categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) discussed this technique as the foundation of qualitative inquiry. Specifically, they highlighted the need to utilize the constant comparative technique, whereby researchers utilize the qualitative data to generate findings that explain the aspects of the various cases. While the aim of this study was not to generate a theory about athletic conference realignment decision making, the use of the multi case study approach allowed for a robust and rich understanding of the determinants influencing this decision.

To supplement the interview and document analysis, I also collected field notes and observations (when appropriate) by implementing a number of observer approaches

(Creswell, 2009). With these observations, this study concentrated on the placement of the intercollegiate athletic department on campus, the proximity of institutional leaders to one another, and the body language of participants during the interview process. I added field and observational notes to the coded interview transcripts for analysis.

### ***Interviews***

The primary data collection was completed through face-to-face and phone-based semi-structured interviews with academic and athletic leaders at each of the selected sites. Across all three institutions, 19 of the 34 interviews were conducted face to face while I visited each campus. I conducted the remaining 13 interviews by phone, due to scheduling constraints for the interviewees. Despite the difference in settings, both the face-to-face and phone interviews followed the same interview protocol (Appendix A), and responses from participants did not differ based on the interview environment. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, depending on the depth of conversation and availability of the participant. Face-to-face interviews took place in participants' offices. To facilitate the face-to-face interviews, I spent 36 to 48 hours at each site, completing six to seven in-person interviews during each visit. I used the remaining time on campus to gather observational notes and access documents within the institution's library.

To gain appropriate insight into the athletic conference realignment process, I selected members of the senior university leadership (academic, student life, and athletic administrations) for participation. Interviewing senior academic and athletic leaders allowed for the identification and solicitation of knowledge from those whom Patton (2002) calls "key informants." Key informants are individuals with in-depth knowledge about the inquiry setting. Key informants also articulate their knowledge of the situation

and provide crucial insight into understanding why and how events happened. I used the general interview protocol (Appendix A). Thus, interviews with participants centered on a predetermined list of questions while maintaining the flexibility in the actual wording and order of the questions (Patton, 1990). The construction of the base interview protocol was rooted in the themes and findings of the academic literature discussed in Chapter 2 and feedback from experts. I used the *a priori* technique to generate the base protocol, so interviews with the selected participants followed a semi-structured approach. These additional questions helped to codify the emerging themes and subthemes from the respondents.

The use of the semi-structured interview approach provided flexibility in dialogue and in the appropriateness of data (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This approach allowed me to conduct interview that were both conversational and data gathering in nature. Consistent with the aims of this study, participants were asked to provide insights into the potential factors influencing the most recent athletic conference realignment decision along with the role they, or their office, played in the decision-making process.

Based on the recommendations of Rubin and Rubin (2004), at the conclusion of the interview, I set aside time to engage in self-reflection where I documented potential issues with the interviews or observations, reviewed responses to the survey, and conducted checks on the audio-taped interviews. During this time, I added to the running theme document, which logged institutional factors and roles of various actors in the decision making for analysis. The coded data provided an understanding of the emerging themes.

Table 2 provides a complete list of participants who gave interviews for this

study. The selection of participants with both homogeneous and unique roles related to governance and involvement in athletics-based decision making was purposeful, enhancing the maximum variation approach to this multiple case study. Additionally, the diversity of roles and experiences provided a holistic view of factors influencing conference realignment and the role of campus actors. In order to present results across each of the three case sites and, more importantly, provide protection to the respondents, participants were identified by a broad categorization of their role within their respective institutions. This also assisted in the analysis of the data.

Table 3: Interview Participants by Institutions (Identified by Standardized Title/Role)

<b>Actual Institutional Title</b>	<b>Standardized Title (to protect anonymity)</b>	<b>University of Missouri (AQ to AQ)</b>	<b>Southern Methodist University (Non-AQ to AQ)</b>	<b>Florida International University (Non-AQ to Non-AQ)</b>
University President/Chancellor	Senior Academic Leader	1*	1	1
Senior Academic Administrator	Senior Academic Leader	3	1	1
Student Affairs Administrator	Student Affairs Administrator	2	1	2
Faculty Athletes Representative	Faculty Council Member	1	1	1
Members of Faculty Senate	Faculty Council Member	1	0	1
Athletic Director	Athletic Administrator	1	1*	1
Senior Athletic Staff Member	Athletic Administrator	2	4	4*
Board of Trustees Member	Board of Trustees Member	1	0	2
Total		12	9	13

Note: \* indicates that at least one individual was interviewed who was no longer employed at the institution, but was involved in decision-making process during conference realignment.

### ***Document Analysis***

The potential liability of interview data was an inability of the informants to accurately recall the issues and circumstances surrounding their conference realignment. The political nature of athletic conference realignment makes building rapport with participants essential to ensuring an accurate description of the events. To address this potential liability, I balanced insights provided by informants with information gathered from other sources, such as electronic documents and archival materials. Analyses of the written documents involved identifying pertinent information from a variety of sources, including media reports, meetings notes and the documents, and institutional presentations on the topic of athletic conference realignment.

The primary purpose of the document analysis was to create individual case summaries and set the institutional context. Providing the context for each site is an important process in understanding the nuances associated with each institution. Press releases, institutional presentations, and other media-based documents also assisted with the development of the study's interview protocol and survey questions. After accessing documents online or through library searches, copies were made and stored with associated field notes. These various archival and documentary data sources helped develop the explanatory case findings and served to provide the appropriate context for the findings.

### ***Survey of Athletic and Academic Leaders***

In addition to using document analysis to contextualize the case sites, an online survey was administered to a sample of national leaders at institutions that had experienced conference realignment between 2004 and 2014. The aim of the survey was to further generalize the findings of the comparative case study. A limitation with any case study approach and with qualitative research in general, is the limited ability to broadly generalize findings. The intercollegiate athletic culture is data-rich (Gallimore, 2006), and combining broad-based survey data with the depth of qualitative inquiry helped legitimize the study's findings.

For researchers utilizing surveys as a data-collection method, Dillman et al. (2009) suggests a piloting procedure to receive a critical review of and feedback on a survey instrument. Prior to administering the survey, a draft survey was circulated between a group of colleagues and scholars who have a particular interest in intercollegiate athletic administration. These individuals provided feedback on the survey and assisted in rewording the questions. This group consisted of both athletic and academic professionals and met the recommendations of Dillman et al. (2009). Dillman recommended that expert feedback and pretesting be conducted “with a variety of different people whose areas of expertise are complementary” (p. 220). Feedback was provided on the survey's construction and on the five-point Likert-type scale. With the initial survey, participants ranked the factors between 1 and 10, with 1 representing the most important factor and 10 representing the least important. However, debriefers felt it best to have respondents rate the influence of factors independently on a five-point (1 - 5) Likert-type scale, with 1 representing not considered within the athletic conference

realignment process and 5 representing an essential factor within the athletic conference realignment process.

The survey was administered through QuestionPro, a web-aid survey program. Participants were sent an initial email requesting their anonymous participation. A follow-up email was sent three days after the initial request. Participants were asked questions related to their experiences with athletic conference realignment. Specially, they were asked to provide their opinions on the influence of various factors on the athletic conference realignment process, as well as the influence of various campus actors on the decision process. Questions were informed by previous scholarly work on intercollegiate athletics, the collected documents for document analysis, and conversations with the debriefing team.

The results from this survey helped to contextualize the qualitative data from the case sites to ensure results from the case study are generalizable to the larger population. Surveys were sent to 28 institutions and 245 individuals. Sixteen of the 28 institutions (57.0%) responded to the survey, with an individual response rate of 31.8 % ( $n = 78$ ). Table 3 provides an overview of survey responses by realignment type and institutional role. A copy of the survey is included in Appendix C.

Table 4: Survey Respondents by Conference Realignment Type (Identified by Standardized Title/Role)

	<b>AQ to AQ</b>	<b>Non-AQ to AQ</b>	<b>Non-AQ to Non-AQ</b>
University President/Chancellor	3	7	6
Senior Academic Administrator	4	3	2
Senior Student Affairs Administrator	6	4	3
Faculty Athletics Representative	6	7	5
Athletic Director / Director of Athletics	4	3	3

Senior Athletic Administrator	4	4	4
Board of Trustees Member	N/A	N/A	N/A
Others	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>23</b>

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis within this study followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) strategy and used a constant-assessment-of-themes method in coding interview transcripts. After each interview, data transcripts were coded and compared to previous data. The constant examination of data led to the emergence of complex relationships of similarity and disparity. Creswell (1998) discussed the process of data analysis as the reduction of information, analysis of relevant statements, identification of relevant themes, and constant exploration of emerging themes from the data.

The data analysis was inductive, examining patterns, themes, and categories that arose from the data. Consistent with qualitative research, data were collected and analyzed concurrently with coded field notes and interview transcripts by using a consistent set of terms based on the dimensions of the conceptual framework. Data collected from each of the selected institutions were transcribed, organized, and classified into patterns. Pattern analysis focused on how respondents correlated with the key factors associated with athletic conference realignment and the role of various institutional leaders in the decision-making process.

To identify pertinent themes and gain a holistic sense of the data, each interview transcript was reviewed multiple times prior to analysis. The "pattern-matching" data analysis technique, as discussed by Yin (2003), was used to match patterns in the data with the theoretical propositions operationalized from the conceptual model. Pattern-

matching techniques were used within each institution as well as across the three realignment types. Codes were assigned to data representing the various dimensions of the framework. Interview questions were all constructed to inform the dimensions of this study's framework. To assist in the management of the qualitative interview transcript data, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis program, Nvivo, was used. Codes were structured into hierarchical tree nodes based on the academic literature and theoretical frameworks. Second, the Nvivo qualitative software was used to help complete a free-node analysis of the transcript data to ensure no broad themes were missing from the initial structured tree nodes.

After confirming the tree nodes, Nvivo provided a coding platform, with Level 1 codes—known as “parent nodes”—and Level 2 nodes—known as “child nodes.” While nodes existed, each completed interview was coded using the following structured hierarchical tree nodes:

Level 1: Factors for Alignment

Level 2: Conference Revenue

Level 2: Institutional Visibility

Level 2: Institutional Brand

Level 2: Increase Exposure

Level 2: Athletic Prestige Seeking

Level 2: Academic Prestige Seeking

Level 1: Strategic Thinking

Level 2: Long-term Planning

Level 2: Multiple Conference Moves

Level 2: Reactionary Process

Level 2: Stability of Resources

Level 1: Role of Campus Actors

Level 2: Decision Making Group

Level 2: Role of the President

Level 2: Role of the Athletic Department / Athletic Director

Level 2: Role of Academics

Level 2: Role of Student Affairs

Level 2: Role of External Actors

Level 1: Drawbacks of Realignment

Level 2: Traditions

Level 2: Rivalries

Level 2: Additional Expenses

However, prior to data analysis, it was important that I conduct a critical self-examination (epoche). Moustakas (1994) stated that epoche is the “process when everyday understandings, judgments, and knowing are set aside, and the phenomenon are revisited, visually, naively, in a wide-open sense, from the vantage point of pure or transcendental ego” (p. 33). In particular, my previous experiences with the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics informed the perspective on the role of revenues within intercollegiate athletics. Moreover, this experience created connections with institutional presidents who served on the Knight Commission. These connections were utilized to facilitate access to the selection sites for this study and to increase participation in the national survey. Specifically, the institutional leader at Southern Methodist

University was the former co-chair of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, and my prior working relationship with him facilitated access to that institution. In acknowledging any potential biases, I discussed my role with multiple faculty members and those who had conducted similar research. This process allowed for reflection on personal biases and created an environment in which to conduct the interviews and analyze the data with a clear sense of personal and intrinsic biases.

### **Trustworthiness**

In establishing trustworthiness, various measures were used to ensure reliability and validity, but also the use of data triangulation ensured that the results were accurately represented. In addition to triangulation, member checks were used as an accountability measure. These checks included repeating responses back to individuals and seeking clarification on responses, if necessary. In qualitative research, the issues surrounding reliability and validity are imperative to producing accepted research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the importance of increasing validity and reliability through the process of constant observation: “The purpose of persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail” (p. 304). Lincoln and Guba also discussed the four terms important in the evaluation of data: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility, for this study, is defined as the congruence between the respondents’ views of their experiences and an accurate replication in this study. A faculty advisor served as a member check to ensure credibility and accurate replication of the participants’ voices within the data. Transferability is further defined as the ability for a

given study to be generalized to similar situations outside of the study. Since this study was conducted at institutions sponsoring Division-I athletic programs, there exists an inherent ability to replicate it in a similar athletic setting. Dependability and confirmability are measures that ensure the study and data analysis were conducted logically, suitably, and with the ability to be traced by future researchers.

The process of triangulation was implemented to increase validity and reliability. Triangulation is the process of ensuring the integrity of the inferences drawn from the data source (Schwandt, 2001). Multiple data sources (interviews from various institutions, document analysis, and member checking) were used to triangulate the data-driven conclusions. Member checks were utilized along with the four measures described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). A peer debriefing team, consisting of five individuals representing various consistencies, served as a check to ensure proper interpretations and conclusions were drawn from the data. The team consisted of two senior members of the athletic department, one athletic administrator in business services, one faculty member, and one graduate student. Individual meetings were conducted with peer debriefers to ensure proper data analysis throughout the interview and survey analysis processes.

After completing each interview, coded transcripts were provided to the team of debriefers to provide insight. Debriefers provided feedback on the coding strategies and emerging themes. In particular, debriefers assisted in understanding the underlying influence of access to additional athletics-based revenue. Additionally, debriefers assisted in completing the final tree nodes and in the decision to collapse various departments (e.g., academic affairs, student affairs, and athletics) with their assigned leader.

External validity is of concern surrounding trustworthiness. For qualitative-based

research, the ability to generalize the results to the larger population is not of primary concern. However, it is generally accepted within qualitative research to ensure external validity by providing thick and rich descriptions of the case and allowing readers to determine whether or not findings relate to a given situation. Chapter 4 details the findings of the three case sites and provides more details regarding the emerging themes and practices. Direct quotations from participants and summations of the interviews provide a rich context into the theme development and the conclusions discussed in Chapter 5.

The final component of trustworthiness is reliability, which is the ability to replicate one's study and achieve similar results. The ever-changing nature of intercollegiate athletics and human nature makes the replication of a given study extremely difficult within qualitative research. For qualitative research, reliability focuses on the consistency between the results and data provided. Strategies for ensuring reliability include the use of an established interview protocol, keeping detailed notes on data collection and analysis decisions, and keeping records of non-verbal data and unusual circumstances occurring during the interview process.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

The steady increase in the prominence of intercollegiate athletics within higher education today continues to impact public perceptions and institutional decision-making. The aggressive expansion of athletic programs has manifested through expansive stadiums, lucrative television contracts, and an increasing need for institutional subsidies to sustain the enterprise (Clotfelter, 2012). It is not surprising that in response to this escalation, athletic departments have increased the number of staff members, universities have continued to subsidize athletic programs, and institutions are consistently positioning themselves for new athletic-based revenue streams. Given the escalation in athletic budgets, public stakeholders and campus individuals (i.e. faculty and academic leaders) have begun to question the justification of expenses and the role of athletics within the universities' strategic plans.

Despite the growing concern from campus stakeholders, public interest in intercollegiate athletics continues to escalate. Athletic programs now serve as the front-porch for institutions' brands and publicity (Suggs, 2011). The pressures to maximize athletic success, combined with a public interest, have created constant movement within athletic conferences to maximize both athletic revenue and prestige. The literature base on the impact of athletics on higher education is well-documented; however, little research examines factors impacting the decision to change athletic conferences. This lack of research provides the foundation for the current study, which seeks to identify the primary factors influencing conference realignment and the roles of various institutional

leaders in the decision-making process. Finally, this study seeks to apply various organizational theories to explain the athletic conference realignment process for Division I-A institutions.

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the data obtained in this study. First, data from the document analysis presents information on each case site institution. Second, the use of participant interviews provides the foundation for the emergent themes around the factors impacting conference realignment and the role of various actors within the decision-making process. Finally, a nationally-representative survey provides confirmation of the results from the document analysis and interviews.

### **Case Site Overviews**

Prior to discussing the emerging themes around athletic conference realignment, Chapter 4 will begin with an in-depth review of the three case study institutions, their institutional structure and governance, overview of the athletic prominence, and decision-making. Similarities amongst the three case studies are evident within the emerging themes; however, each institution represents a distinct type of athletic conference realignment.

#### ***University of Missouri***

Founded in 1839, as the first public university west of the Mississippi River, the University of Missouri in Columbia is a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU), the nation's most prestigious group of 59 public and private institutions. Located halfway between St. Louis and Kansas City, UM's operates a \$2 billion institutional budget with more than 34,000 students and 262,500 alumni worldwide. In the fall of 2014, 80.9% of the student body was White and 7.7% Black.

Ninety-four percent of students attend full-time and greater than 80% receive some form of financial aid. MU is both a land-grant university with a statewide mission of service to citizens and the major public research university in the state.

UM offers more than 300 degree programs through 19 colleges and schools and has the largest research operation of any public university in Missouri. In addition to opening the nation's first and leading journalism program, MU offers 12 major undergraduate research programs and has been recognized by the National Science Foundation as one of the top 10 universities in the country for integrating research into undergraduate education. More than 1,200 students participate in study abroad programs in 58 countries.

#### *UM Athletics*

Athletic sports at UM include men's and women's basketball, baseball, cross country, football, golf, gymnastics, swimming & diving, softball, track, tennis, volleyball, women's soccer, and wrestling. UM is the only NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision program in the State of Missouri. While having a rich tradition of athletic sponsorship, Missouri has achieved six total national championships with one in baseball (1954), one in indoor track and field (1965) and four in wrestling (2006, 2007, 2010, and 2014). The men's basketball team has appeared in 22 NCAA tournaments, the second-most NCAA Tournament appearances without a final four appearance. The men's basketball team has appeared in the regional finals (Elite Eight) of the NCAA tournament six times. They have won 15 conference championships in total. In 1994, UM went undefeated in the Big 8 to take the regular season title. In 2009, the men's basketball team won its first Big 12 Championship.

### *UM Athletic Conference Membership and Realignment*

On November 6, 2011, the University of Missouri announced that it would be leaving the Big 12 Conference to join the Southeastern Conference effective July 1, 2012. In September 2012, the school's wrestling team became an associate member of the Mid-American Conference, as the SEC does not sponsor wrestling. Prior to joining the SEC in 2012, Missouri was a charter member of the Big 12 Conference, competing in that conference since 1907. At its inception, the Big 12 Conference was known as the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association. It officially changed its name to the Big Eight Conference in 1964, then to the Big 12 in 1996 after adding half of the remaining schools in the former Southwest Conference. In 2010-2011, it was reported that the Big Ten Conference was seeking to add the University of Missouri in their expansion; however, the Big Ten Conference decided to add the University of Nebraska leaving many to question the process.

When discussing the decision to move to the SEC, then Chancellor Brady Deaton stated, “The Southeastern Conference is a highly successful, stable, premier athletic conference that offers exciting opportunities for the University of Missouri” (CNN, 2011, n.p.) He continued by saying:

In joining the SEC, MU partners with universities distinguished for their academic programs and their emphasis on student success. The SEC will provide our student-athletes with top flight competition and unparalleled visibility. We came to this decision after careful consideration of the long term best interests of our university. We believe the Southeastern Conference is an outstanding home

for the Mizzou Tigers, and we take great pride in our association with this distinguished league CNN (2011).

In articulating her position, a member of the Faculty Athletic Council at the UM provided the following insight during her interview regarding the move to the Southeastern Conference:

With the loss of Texas A&M, there is no scenario under which the Big 12 would be in a conference of equal academic standing to the old Big 12. Our academic reputation will be decreased. We have a lot in common with our current Big 12 colleagues, but perhaps not so much with our potential new colleagues.

Interestingly, with the shift of TA&M we now have more in common with the SEC.

Finally, the athletic director published an open letter to stakeholders and classified the realignment as an opportunity to, “seize the opportunities, challenge ourselves and commit to achieving success” (Atkins, 2012, n.p)

### ***Southern Methodist University***

Southern Methodist University (SMU) is a private research university in University Park, TX – a suburb of Dallas. Founded in 1911 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, SMU operates satellite campuses in Plano, TX and Taos, NM. SMU offers nationally competitive undergraduate, graduate and professional programs through seven degree-granting schools in humanities and sciences, business, engineering, arts, education and human development, law, and theology. SMU is one of the 76 colleges and universities with an endowment that exceeds \$1 billion and is ranked 61<sup>st</sup> across all institutions. For the 2013-14 academic year, undergraduate tuition and fees totaled

\$43,800. In 2012 SMU had a total undergraduate enrollment of 6,249, with 49 percent male and 26 percent from an underrepresented student population. Thirty-two percent of undergraduates reside in one of the 17 on-campus residence halls or apartments.

As a private institution, budget shortfalls have plagued the university since 1915 and they have continued to do so throughout its history. Enrollment grew significantly after World War II, twenty new buildings were built, and Phi Beta Kappa founded its Texas Gamma Chapter on the campus (LaSalle 2003, p.11). SMU began as a regional institution, but by the mid-1970s and early 1980s, it often referred to itself as the Harvard of the South (LaSalle. 2003). L. Donald Shields became the eighth president of SMU and would serve from 1980 through 1986. With the economics of Dallas increasing and the University striving for excellence in all areas (including academic reputation), the Shields administration designed a campaign called *The Decade Ahead*. Endowment grew to over \$300 million by 1986 and was ranked among the top college/university endowments in the country (LaSalle 2003, p.13). It was in 1982 that President Shields established the SMU President's Scholars Program. At its inception, University administrators defined the program's goal as finding a cadre of wealthy donors to endow scholarships that would provide full tuition, study abroad, and other fringe benefits to high-achieving high school students (LaSalle 2003, p.13). Sadly, the football scandal of 1986 along with a major downturn of the economy ended any progress and expansion of the program. It wasn't until a number of years later under the leadership of A. Kenneth Pye, ninth president of SMU, that credibility and financial support from the community returned to the university.

### *SMU Athletics*

SMU's athletics department sponsors 18 varsity sports, including seven men's and 11 women's programs. The school was the undisputed national championship football team (1935), a shared football national championship (1982), and a number of football All Americans. Between the 1980 and 1985 seasons, SMU had the winningest Division I football program in the nation. Beyond football, SMU men's basketball program had one Final Four Appearance accompanied by 14 Southwest Conference Championships. The SMU women's basketball program has advanced to postseason competition 12 times since 1993. Men's soccer and men's golf are two other athletic programs in which SMU sponsors nationally ranked teams.

At the core of all athletic decisions at SMU are the events that transpired between the NCAA and the institution in 1986. During the 1986 season, the NCAA investigated the school for the second time in five years. This investigation centered on the paying of players, and issued the strongest penalty ever received by an NCAA member institution. The penalty, brought on by illegal payments to players, called for the school to shut down the football program for two years – known at the “Death Penalty”. In February of 1987, the Infractions Committee of the NCAA voted unanimously to cancel SMU's entire 1987 football season and all four of SMU's scheduled home games. In April that same year, SMU also cancelled the 1988 season – self-imposing a death penalty for a second football season. The severity of the penalty left the SMU football program in disarray. Post penalty, SMU had only one winning football season over the next 20 years and failed to make another bowl game until 2009. To date, it is one of the most severe penalties ever

imposed on a Division I program, and the only time the NCAA has canceled a football-playing school's entire season at any level.

#### *SMU Athletic Conference Membership and Realignment*

SMU currently participates in the NCAA's Division I (FBS for football) as a member of the American Athletic Conference (formerly known as the Big East Conference), where they are currently the only private school in the conference. They will be joined by two additional private schools in 2014 -- Tulane and Tulsa. From 1918 to 1996, the Mustangs were a member of the Southwest Conference, until it formally disbanded. The Mustangs subsequently joined the Western Athletic Conference and in 2005, SMU accepted an invitation to the Western Division of Conference USA. They accepted an invitation to join the Big East (now named American Athletic Conference) in 2013.

In December 2011, SMU announced that they accepted an invitation to the join the Big East Conference – at the time an Automatic Qualifying (AQ) conference within the BCS structure. Within SMU's press release, President Gerald Turner stated, “our move to the Big East is good for SMU, for Dallas and for this region of the country and reflects the reemergence of our successful football program” (SMU, 2011). He continued:

Coupled with our steady rise academically and athletically, we are in a good position to continue our rise among national universities. On top of that, a grassroots effort of our alumni, elected officials and steadfast supporters coast-to-coast gave us the momentum we needed. We look forward to this new era of competition (SMU, 2011).

The Athletic Director at the time of the announcement stated:

This is a move that will impact all aspects of the collegiate experience at SMU.

Our move to the Big East will help us increase our exposure and visibility and will raise SMU's profile on a national level. Big East membership represents SMU's return to the highest level of collegiate athletics (SMU, 2011).

The university developed a question and answer page to assist stakeholders understanding of the move to the Big East Conference. They stated that primary motivations for the realignment were "increased quality of competition, a heightened and expanded recruiting base, and national media exposure for SMU are among the initial benefits." The website also provides the following four reasons: 1) more compelling schedule; 2) financial benefits; 3) increased exposure; and 4) access to BCS bowls (SMU, 2011).

### ***Florida International University***

Florida International University (FIU) is an urban public university established in 1972. Despite being a relatively young institution, FIU has already achieved high research distinction, serving more than 40,000 students, producing greater than 100,000 alumni, and employing over 1,000 faculty members. FIU comprises two campuses—Modesto Maidique Campus located in the southwest Miami area and the Biscayne Campus in the northeastern Miami area. In addition, FIU has two off-site academic locations—Broward Pines Center and a downtown Miami, FL site.

Academically, FIU current offers approximately 200 different bachelors, master's, and doctoral degrees housed within the university's 21 schools and/or colleges. In addition to the traditional undergraduate and graduate programs, FIU launched a

Medical School in Fall 2009 and the School of Public and International Affairs (SIPA) in Spring 2008. The new offerings are in addition to FIU's established Law School.

FIU's geographical location, Miami-Dade County in Florida, contributes to the university's diverse student population. According to the most recent publically reported data through the *Integrated and Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)*, 60% of FIU students attending the university are Hispanic, followed by 17% White Non-Hispanic, 12% Black, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 7% minority groups (FIU, 2009). Seventy-seven percent of enrolling students reside with Miami-Dade County (FIU, 2009).

FIU reports an operating budget for the 2008-2009 academic year of \$643.4 million. According to FIU's Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness *2008 Fact Book*, the top three sources of funds are: 52% education and general (E&G), 15% auxiliary enterprises, and 13% from sponsored research. The remaining 20% of the FIU budget comes from Activity and Service (2%), Athletics (3%), and Auxiliary Enterprises (15%). FIU's budget has not escaped the economic crisis affecting the state of Florida.

Similar to the many state-funded institutions, FIU's budget for the 2009-10 academic year suffered a 15% reduction in state appropriations or support. According to former FIU President, Modesto Maidique (2009):

FIU, like our sister universities, must accommodate a 15 percent reduction in recurring General Revenue. Units were already planning to reduce their 2009-10 budgets by \$8.2 million. However, an additional \$11.4 million cut in 2009-10 is necessary to respond to the latest legislative cuts. (pg.1).

In August 2009, FIU appointed a new president, Mark Rosenberg. President Rosenberg is a former FIU Interim Provost and Executive Vice- President, Director of the

Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC), and a faculty member. Rosenberg returned to FIU after holding the position of chancellor of the Florida State University System. After his appointment, Rosenberg stated that his priorities would be to make the university financially sustainable and continued growth of the university's reputation (Cochran, 2009).

#### *FIU Athletics*

FIU houses more than 400 student-athletes competing in 18 varsity sports, including seven men's and 11 women's programs. Since joining Division I competition, FIU Athletics teams have competed in 42 total NCAA postseason tournaments and 102 All-America honors. Recently, FIU programs have experienced athletic success with conference championships in football, baseball, women's soccer and tennis. In addition, the football team has participated in back-to-back bowl games in 2010 and 2011.

FIU possesses its own on-campus football stadium, Alfonso Field at FIU Stadium, which was renovated in 2008 and expanded to 48,000 seats in 2012. U.S. Century Bank Arena, home to FIU men's and women's basketball and volleyball, has also become a model facility in the city of Miami annually hosting commencement, athletics and premium entertainment events. In early 2012, and in preparation for conference realignment, FIU finished nearly \$10 million in renovations and enhancements to the arena which now includes a suite level, picturesque grand entrance and many new amenities.

#### *FIU Athletic Conference Membership and Realignment*

FIU is a member of the NCAA, participating in Division I, and a current member of Conference USA – joining in 2013. Upon moving from the Division II athletes in

1991, FIU joined the Trans America Athletic Conference (TAAC; now the Atlantic Sun Conference) until 1998. In 1998, FIU joined the Sun Belt Conference and remained until 2013.

In May 2012, FIU announced they would be leaving the SunBelt Conference to become members of Conference USA. Within the press release, President Mark Rosenberg stated, “This move to Conference USA is about providing greater opportunity for our student-athletes and our fans” (Aguila, 2012). Conference USA’s Commission stated,

The growth of FIU is one of the truly great stories in American higher education and we are delighted to welcome FIU to the conference. It is obvious to us that the University has great future potential and we are excited to be able to partner with them going forward. We are also pleased to bring Conference USA to South Florida.

This signaled a mutually beneficial relationship between Conference USA and FIU.

### **Qualitative Case Study Findings**

During the analysis of participant interviews, several noticeable themes emerged that helped to explain the primary research questions. Given the lack of literature on conference realignments and the role of academic leadership, these themes provided foundational insights into factors affecting athletic conference realignment. Two broad themes emerged through the analysis: 1) factors impacting athletic conference realignment and 2) the role of institutional actors within the decision-making process. Within each of the broad themes, several subthemes emerged that provided additional insight. Data within each subtheme will be presented through thematic (presentation of

common themes across sites) versus conference realignment approach (a comparative of themes across conference realignment type (i.e., AQ to AQ, Non-AQ to AQ, or Non-AQ to Non-AQ) approaches.

### **Factors Affecting Conference Realignment**

The primary aim of this study was to gain insight into the factors that impacted the athletic conference realignment decision. Overall, participants at each of three sites refuted the public discourse that athletic conference realignment was solely about access to athletic revenues. While participants did discuss an underlying consideration around athletic revenues, institutional visibility and branding served as larger rationale for deciding to realign conferences. Participants at each site discussed a small number of drawbacks associated with realignment from their current conference along with the decision-making process concentrated amongst a relatively small subgroup on institutional leaders.

#### ***Refuting the Public Discourse***

Participants were asked to provide their general thoughts on the conference realignment process and the overarching reasons for engaging in the decision to realign. In general, participants provided summary sentiments that refuted the public discourse of realignment simply about accessing additional revenues. The senior administrator with the University of Missouri's Alumni Association recalled the public discourse around athletic conference realignment when he stated, "Aw, this is just an athletic money grab. That's all ya'll are doing. That's all you care about. It's just a business. You're throwing everything away for that." However, participants provided a more complex picture of the factors affecting the athletic conference realignment decision. The interplay between

additional athletics-based revenue with increasing institutional visibility and prestige served as the primary factors for athletic conference realignment.

A member of the faculty council who oversees athletics at the University of Missouri provided a summary of the three primary drivers of athletic conference realignment: “moving up in conference alignment provides different -- and sometimes better -- institutional associations, more visibility, and increased revenue.” Her sentiments were further codified by an institutional leader who summarized his reasoning for switching conferences, by saying, “the two primary drivers for our move to the new conference were access to revenue and increased exposure.” Even a senior athletic administrator at FIU saw the athletic conference realignment as having diversified benefits, “academic reputation, additional visibility, and prestige for the university.”

Underlying the primary reasons was a desire of each institution to not “to be left behind. [They] don’t want the Big 5 conferences to divorce [them] and be left behind. [They] are going to do whatever we can to get into one of these conferences.” A senior academic administrator at FIU continued with, “It’s really a much simpler process than it appears, especially when you’re making a jump up to a better conference.” Finally, a student affairs administrator at an institution looking to move from a non-AQ conference to an AQ conference stated, “You got to try to move up; if you don’t, someone else will take your spot.”

### ***Impact of Athletic Revenue***

Despite discussing the alternative reasons for the decision to change athletic conference, the majority of participants acknowledged what one called “the elephant in the room,” which was additional athletic revenue. The senior institutional leader at FIU

stated, “Revenue is a driver of our decision. It wasn’t the major driver, but it was one of the primary drivers.” He went on to explain his thoughts on the role of access to additional revenue:

As an academic institution, we obsess on academic quality. We obsess on impact. We obsess on finding ways to enable our students to be successful. That takes revenue; all of that. In some respects, it’s a variation on a theme.

The pressure for increasing athletic revenue appears to weigh heavier on institutions not already within an AQ conference. A senior athletic administrator from SMU discussed the pressures of competition and necessity of the athletic revenues: “It would also have been financially very difficult if we did not have access to the revenue of a power conference.” Another athletic administrator at SMU added his thoughts about access to additional conference revenue: “You would expect there to be a net gain when looking at operating costs versus new revenue -- related to institutional subsidy.”

Responses on the influence of additional athletic revenues from participants who were already located within an AQ conference told a slightly different story. A member of the Board of Curators (Trustees) at the University of Missouri stated, “It was not about increased conference revenues, but it was really a question of stability.” A senior academic administrator at the University of Missouri validated that realignment was driven by stability rather than a request for increased revenue. She stated, “In fact, I would say stability may have been the primary driver of changing conferences. We had no idea if the Big 12 would exist in the future, at least from this level.” When asked about the role of money in the conference realignment decision, a senior alumni relations administrator at the University of Missouri provided the following response:

It absolutely was about the money. But you're not thinking of money the way I'm thinking of it. You're thinking we're leaving because there's this big pot of gold somewhere down south that we're going to go grab. That's not it. We're leaving because the instability of the current money that we need to run our athletic program. That instability is what worries our institutions as it may not be here forever. It almost happened.

He continued, "The economics thing came into it, too. We're probably going to end up making more money in the SEC at some point. We don't know when, but probably at some point, they're in a better position to move forward."

### ***Increasing Institutional Visibility through Conference Realignment***

Postsecondary administrators and leaders feel intercollegiate athletics serve as a mechanism to increase institutional visibility and reputation. When asked about the primary determinants of their athletic conference realignment, a senior institutional leader at the University of Missouri stated, "number one was the enhancement of the institutional visibility that came with alignment with the new conference." A senior athletic administrator at the University of Missouri echoed similar insight into the reasons why realignment made sense at his institution:

Okay. If you're going to do this, the fastest growing area in the country is in the southeastern part of the country. Hopefully this should result in a bigger footprint for our university, in opportunity to attract students, research scholars, or media markets, or whatever that might be. That was one of the driving forces behind why you would do that.

An institutional leader at Southern Methodist University saw conference realignment as an opportunity to enhance a portion of the university's strategic plan. He saw, "The primary drivers were solidifying the Eastern flank of the conference, and opening up new markets for both athletic and academic recruiting." He went on to state:

We started recruiting the Northeast about 10 years ago. Gaining exposure up there is an important institutional priority. The move to the Big East was more to us than moving up the job chain in ranking of athletic conferences. It really had an institutional visibility component and central academic mission to it.

At the same institution, a senior student affairs administrator stated, "I think being positioned in the Northeast in this new conference certainly is going to help us with our visibility in the northeast corridor." An institutional leader at FIU stated, "Our strategy has been to have national visibility, national impact, and national competitiveness in everything that we do. Moving to Conference USA allows us to increase our brand."

Conscious consideration was given to the potential impact of the increased visibility could have on student applications and enrollments. An enrollment management professional at the University of Missouri stated:

We have not had a real presence in the Southeast part of the country. In a sense if we became a part of the conference and that opened up whole new territory for us, I mean because our brand would become known in the South East where it really isn't now or hadn't been in the past.

She continued to state that immediately following conference realignment, "We saw an increase in the number of applications and deposits made from the South East." A senior athletic administrator recalled telling his staff, "athletics have been recognized as one of

the most visible entities of our university, and we have an opportunity with increased exposure to continue to heighten Mizzou's level of awareness. Capitalizing on this new era is very important." In a conversation about athletic conference realignment, an athletics professional at the University of Missouri further clarified his thoughts on increased visibility by saying:

From a recruiting standpoint, this is moving you into a whole different part of the country for not only student athletes, but for students. Our primary recruiting base for students at Mizzou is in Missouri and the bordering states, and then in Chicago and the Dallas metropolitan area. Those are the areas that are the highest concentrated out-of-state recruiting. Now you're having more of a presence in another part of the country.

Even in the absence of the financial gains, an institutional leader at SMU talked about his thought process around conference realignment and stated:

As a result, financially so far it has not come close to meeting expectation, but the visibility on TV is much greater and our recruiters tell us that the visibility of the university, more and more kids know who SMU is and where it is located. From that standpoint it has been a real win for us.

### ***Alignment with Peers and Increasing Prestige***

An extension from increasing institutional visibility, campus leaders at each of the three institutions discussed the roles that peer institutions and institutional alignment played in the athletic conference realignment process. They discussed the opportunity to increase the both academic and athletic prestige through this strategic alignment with a new set of peer institutions. A senior academic administrator at FIU expressed the

sentiment shared by many of the participants: “Athletic conference realignment was a conduit to align strategically with institutions that could increase both your academic and athletic profile.”

An academic leader at FIU stated, “We believe that moving conferences was part of that improvement strategy.” He also said “improvement is not only focused on increasing our athletic program, but also growing the academic enterprise.” A senior student affairs administrator at SMU echoed similar sentiments: “It’s a financial investment for us right now, we believe there’s a long-term pay out in terms of institutional reputation and recognition.” A member of the faculty athletics council at University of Missouri provided a more concrete example about a potential move from the Big 12 to the SEC:

With the loss of TA&M, there is no scenario under which the Big 12 would be in a conference of equal academic standing to the old Big 12. Our academic reputation will be decreased. We have a lot in common with our current Big 12 colleagues, but perhaps not so much with our potential new colleagues.

Interestingly, with the shift of TA&M, we now have more in common with the SEC.

She continued:

It was crucial to be a member of a big time conference. As a flagship school of a state with no professional sports, we believed that it would have been devastating to not be a member of a top tier conference. It would also have been financially very difficult if we did not have access to the revenue of a power conference.

Aligning with institutions that had similar characteristics also appeared to be a strong rationale for an institution to decide to change athletic conferences. As institutional leader at SMU stated:

We were attracted to the fact that there were seven private institutions in our destination conference. The seven current members liked the thought of playing us as well.... The academic quality of the schools, the general sense was, it is better to play Georgetown and St. Johns than it might be some of the schools that were in CUSA...it was considered a positive move academically.

A similar sentiment was shared by an institutional leader at FIU, who discussed the need to grow his relatively-young institution in a strategic and aggressive way. His view was that athletic conference realignment would assist in this strategic initiative. He stated:

The institution has historically been in a rural area and under-appreciated in our system. Significant pressures arose over many years to enhance the reputation and national visibility of the university, aligning with a set of institutional peers that helped to escalate. Moving to Conference USA provided an opportunity to align with such peers. In sum, institutions and their leaders felt that conference realignment created an opportunity to be “partnered with institutions that have missions that are more consistent with our mission.

### **The Decision-Making Process**

Beyond the factors that affect the realignment process, the participants provided insights into the strategic decision-making process. In particular, the participants discussed the way institutions strategically planned for future opportunities, the impact of

prior experiences in the informing of current opportunities, and drawbacks institutional administrators considered when making their final decisions. There existed commonalities within the drawbacks considered and the presence of negative prior experiences with realignment across all types of conference realignment. However, there were differences in the strategic planning process between institutions already situated within an AQ conference as compared to those looking to move into an AQ conference.

### ***Strategic Thinking about the Realignment Decision***

For institutions leaving non-AQ conferences, there existed a clear and consistent strategic planning process about athletic conference membership. Within these institutions, campus leaders discussed a meaningful and distinctive preparation for a future “move-up” within an athletic conference. For example, an athletic administrator at FIU stated, “conference realignment didn’t just happen in a single day, a week, or a month. We looked at different options over many months.” A student affairs administrator at FIU codified the potential length of the planning process. She stated, “We’ve been engaged in multiple conversations around conference realignment at least since I’ve been here, in the six and a half years.” She went further to say, “These conversations included potential scenarios and how campus-based investments could be leveraged to place the institutions in the right position for future realignment.” Finally, an institutional leader at FIU also articulated strategic planning around athletic conference realignment stating, “We weren’t waiting for the phone to ring, but we did have processes in place and were thinking about it for a long time and preparing.”

Athletic directors and senior athletic administrators at SMU provided a more in-depth treatment of their strategic thinking about athletic conference realignment. A senior

athletic administrator at SMU described his approach to the athletic conference realignment as, “I took the mentality of always keeping one eye up and one eye down.”

He continued to explain:

It is about making sure that you are maximizing the current situation while planning for the next move. We wanted to make sure that we were succeeding in our current conference, partly because we knew that success in athletics, combined with our institution’s academic reputation, would position us in a way that if realignment occurred we would be attractive.

The idea of maximizing the current situation while preparing for the next opportunity was shared by other athletic administrators at non-AQ conferences who were looking into potential AQ conferences. Another athletic administrator at an SMU stated,

I think any university in our situation is always interested in moving up. However, what I told my staff was they we need to assume that the invite is not going to come, so we need to make our current conference as strong as it can be.

Finally, a senior student affairs administrator at SMU stated, “We weren’t courted to a new conference and so we had to make the case that people should take another look at us.”

For institutions recently switching from a non-AQ to another non-AQ conference, there was a more concentrated focus on planning for the next steps. The institutional leader at FIU stated, “It was always a part of the conversation, which we need to get better facilities and better coaching to be competitive so that we can have a chance to move-up.” The athletic director at the same institutions provided a more detailed depiction of the strategic thinking around preparation for athletic conference realignment:

We started part of this process of reaching out to new potential conferences about two years before it happened. We wanted to set ourselves up in a position where we were attractive to them, educate them of who we are athletically, along with the academic strength of our institutions.

A senior athletic administrator responded with, “We’re always trying to get us in a better position” when asked about potential future athletic conference realignment.

A senior athletic administrator at the University of Missouri, an institution that moved laterally between two AQ conferences, replied when asked about his thoughts leading up the realignment, “We were committed to our current conferences and did everything we needed to do to make that work.” The former chancellor at Missouri expressed similar sentiments, “We were deeply committed to making the Big-12 work and we did everything to ensure we stayed within that conference.” The athletic director at the University of Missouri stated:

Our focus was on succeeding in the Big-12. We wanted to make sure that we maximized our potential. There wasn’t really any strategic thought about moving to this conference or that conference or what it would mean in-terms of success.

We were just trying to make the best of our current situation.

A similar view of the situation was expressed by a senior academic administrator at Missouri who described the process as, “not starting out as a strategic process. I think it was more of a reaction to the invitations we were receiving.”

Institutional leaders with memberships in AQ conferences discussed the ability to dictate terms and influence the decision-making process potentially more than those looking to move from a non-AQ conference. In particular, a senior athletic administrator

at the University of Missouri stated, “We were driving the bus, and we were trying to make sure that we found the best place for us to go.” His colleague continued, “When we left, it was really easy to see the demarcation. Okay, this is what Missouri wants and if the new conference did not provide it, we did not go. If they agreed to our terms, we would accept.”

Administrators at institutions who were making a switch between two AQ conferences were deliberate in describing a process that was more reactionary. They were deliberate in making their decision. A senior alumni relations administrator stated, “Even though the process was probably reactionary in that regard, I will say this; the decision to actually move took a lot longer than I thought it would.” An enrollment management professional at Missouri discussed the projections and data she provided to the chancellor to aid in the decision-making process. She said, “We compiled institutional profiles for all institutions within both potential conferences. It took time and the administrator was deliberate in deciding which opportunity was best for Missouri.”

### ***Impact of Prior Experiences***

An underlying subtheme for strategic planning on conference realignment was rooted in the desire to not being left out or the impact of past experiences manifested either through real-life experiences or anticipatory desires. All athletic and academic leaders at these three institutions referenced this desire not to be left behind as part of the decision to realign athletic conferences. Two of the three institutions referenced actual experiences with prior realignment, and the third institution talked about witnessing peer institutions that did not act during prior realignment opportunities.

At SMU, there were direct references made to the impact of the prior conference realignment. A senior student affairs administrator stated, “I would bet your dollars to donuts that a conversation around conference realignment has gone on at SMU ever since the Southwest Conference broke up and we did not get into the Big-12.” She continued to explain the impact of previous dealings with conference realignment and on their recent move:

Whereas I think at SMU, we’re like the woman whose man dumped her 25 years ago and she’s still hoping he comes back, or you can reverse the gender. We used to be one of the big boys...some of the other schools were never a part of the big boys. When conference realignment came we were ready but they weren’t as interested. For us, it’s just like “Let us come back to what we used to be.” It just kills every single one of our alums to see all these schools that we used to be with just outpacing that and we’re just trying in every way that we can to let people know we’re ready again for the big time.

SMU’s institutional leader echoed similar sentiments: “Most people said the death penalty really did SMU in, well the death penalty was difficult, but what did us the most harm athletically was not being included in the initial Big 12 conference realignment. That was really as serious as the death penalty.”

The University of Missouri had a much more recent experience with realignment during the potential move to the Big Ten a year prior. A member of the faculty athletics council at the University of Missouri stated, “I think everything that was being done here is being done to be the best that we could be within our current situation and the flirtation within the Big Ten left a bad taste.” She continued with:

The potential backdoor dealings around the Big Ten invitation showed our campus the negative side of the conference realignment process... It just showed us that we needed to be more strategic in who we partnered with in the future and how decisions could play out.

The role these experiences played on informing future realignments was further discussed by a senior alumni relations administrator at Missouri when he stated, “In a way the experience with the Big Ten forced our hand somewhat, it made us become more proactive about our institution and where we would be placed.” He continued to discuss the impact of recent experiences by saying, “Maybe the next time around we knew if we were going to go somewhere, we had to be a little more aggressive with it and do some things a little bit differently.”

At all three institutions, there existed a philosophy that if you did not engage in conference realignment, institutions might “get left behind, but in a perfect storm, you will be left behind for a very long time or forever.” The athletic director at FIU expressed his thoughts about being ready: “So, when and if you’re asked to dance, that you’re ready and you’re going to dance. You’re ready to say, yes.” He continued, “The worst thing you can do is not be ready and have other people run with the opportunity.”

In addition to the fear of being left behind, participants discussed the fact that the decision to join an athletic conference was easy after an offer was made, due to strategic planning and investments the institutions made prior to an official invitation. An athletic director from FIU lamented on the fact that institutions rarely move to a less prestigious conference nor do they dismiss an offer to join a new conference when he stated:

I don’t even remember any time where an institution has been offered to come

into a conference and they have not accepted. The way this works is you're not going to ask someone to dance unless you know they're going to say yes.

### ***The Drawbacks of Realignment***

"It's not all positives. Mostly, it's positives, but there are some negatives," expressed a senior athletic administrator at FIU about the realities of athletic conference realignment. When asked, nearly all participants expressed at least one drawback to their recent athletic conference realignment. However, the remaining responses stated that, "potential drawbacks, we didn't see many." This was particularly true for FIU, as not only did it transition between two non-AQ conferences, but infancy of the academic institution created a heightened desire to increase their athletic profile and prominence within the academic landscape.

When drawbacks were identified by participants, the primary concern mentioned by a number of participants was the loss of traditions and rivalries. In particular, a senior athletics administrator at FIU stated, "conference realignment and then continued realignment actually created some loss of regionally and rivalries." An institutional leader at SMU stated his primary reservation associated with conference realignment was the loss of "long-held conference traditions." A member of the Board of Curators at the University of Missouri provided a unique perspective, as both an alumnus and a decision-maker:

Well, we were one of the founding members for the old Big 8. A lot of us, including myself, had fond memories and have fond memories of some of the competition that we had had in the old Big 8 and then the Big 12, and on the Kansas side of the state in particular, the rivalry with KU, was something that was

an issue that was discussed, and the impact on that. In terms of just the heritage and the history of our association with the Big 8 and then the Big 12, it's never something you want to do lightly, because of all of that. And our alums remember that as well. That was certainly a factor we weighed in the calculation.

A senior athletic administrator at the University of Missouri discussed the rivalries from both academic and athletic perspectives. He stated:

I certainly think that tradition was the biggest drawback for us making the decision. You have traditional schools that you have competed against. I think the academic collaborative. You wanted to make sure, particularly, our relationship in a lot of the biosciences with Iowa State and with Kansas State, and some other schools that were in the league were important.

These losses of rivalries extended to differences in academic and athletic cultures.

A senior student affairs administrator at SMU explained:

Right now when you think about the loss of wonderful rivalries and how hard it is for fans now to get to some of the games, the cultural differences...when you bring West Virginia out here to Texas. We wear dresses and boots to games, and that's not how they dress in West Virginia.

A secondary drawback for some of the participants was a lack of institutional and academic collegiality. A senior institutional leader at SMU stated, "the collegiality within CUSA was really high and I have some good friends within each institution." He went on to say that he "knew that given the competition between Rice and Houston and the factor that Rice had a small fan following, they might not be able to come along." The awareness that there was going to be a loss of institutional collaborations with long-time

partners did not only give pause to SMU's president, but a faculty member at the University of Missouri also commented, "I was worried about losing our Midwestern identity. Leaving our traditional academic partners was the hardest part."

### **Campus-Based Actors**

The second aim of this study was to codify the role of various campus leaders within the decision-making process. The small, yet collective, role of presidents and athletic directors emerged as the dominant decision-making core for realignment decisions. Concerns around information leaks and the "high-stakes" nature of decisions provided the prominent rationale for the insulated decision-making group. While justifying a small group for the decision making, the role of a strong president also emerged as a theme across each of the three sites.

### ***Collective Decision Making***

In asking participants about the roles of the campus administrators, nearly each interviewee painted a similar picture of the actors involved. Describing the process at FIU, a senior athletic administrator stated, "It was primarily the president's office, and, obviously, the athletics' office. There was some consultation with the CFO's office and legal counsel." A senior athletic administrator at Missouri recalled the convening of the decision makers:

What happened on the day we found out the Big 12 was possibly collapsing is that Steve Owens, who was the interim president of the whole system at that time and then Phil Hoskins, who was our general counsel at that time, Brady Deaton the Chancellor at the time, and myself, went to the roof of the press box before our first football game. It's in the first quarter of the game. Those are the four

people that at that time, in particular, with Brady's leadership, said, "Look. This thing could be blowing up, and we're going to have to do what's best for Mizzou. We've done everything we can to try to keep the Big 12 together and Brady in his leadership role; but now, to fix the problem that we're just carrying, we're going to have to do what's best for us.

A similar ideology was described by a senior student affairs administrator at SMU:

I'd say it was collaboration between the president and the board, and the athletic director. Because in order for it to come to fruition, all of them had to agree that this is the best thing. Because the athletic director has to think about "Are we ready for that level of competition? What does that mean in terms of our travel? Can we recruit a different kind of athlete to be in a more competitive conference?" Our president, of course, has to think strategically this makes sense for the university's direction and our board as well.

Each of these three institutions continued to talk about how they also included their Boards of Trustees/Curators throughout the process. An institutional leader at FIU stated, "Our Board of Trustees was in a sense, more informal; not necessarily formal. I had the authority to make a change, but the issue was to make sure that the board was aligned with that, and we did do that."

A member of the Board of Curators at Missouri stated, "Our Board provides autonomy to its individual campuses, however, since this was a large-scale and important decision, the Board was involved and provided support through a resolution."

Finally, an institutional leader at SMI recalled the involvement of the Board:

SMU: The Board was supportive but was not driving it. There was an understood goal of getting us back to the Southwest Conference, what name it has currently.

Interviewer: Did the Board take any official action?

SMU: Realignment occurred in between Board meetings; however, an executive session of the Board was called. I presented the financial impact, risk assessment, and potential benefits. The executive committee provided their support and guidance after that meeting. They remained involved in the process from then on.

### ***Reasons for an Isolated Group***

When asked about the reasons for the small and isolated decision-making group, each institution provided a similar response. In particular, an institutional leader at Missouri stated, “There was a very brief time window for a decision, so only the important decision-makers were consulted.” An athletic leader at FIU provided a descriptive analogy and rationale for keeping the group small when saying, “It’s not like you can put out a ‘For Sale’ sign out on your doorstep and say, ‘Hey we are entertaining the idea of leaving our current conference, are there any takers?’” He continued to describe his reasoning as:

At the end of the day, you’re grateful to be in the conference that you’re in. You don’t want to be disrespectful of that conference, but you also owe it to your alumni, your staff, your students, all the authority groups of your institution to make sure that you’re doing your due diligence. If you have a large group

involved it opens the risk of information getting back to your current conference and information being portrayed incorrectly.

A member of the faculty athletics' council at the University of Missouri rationalized her lack of positioning within the decision-making process as, "at some point it's just so hush-hush. It's so shut down. It's not that nobody's talking you know." An administrator at SMU provided thoughts on rational for the small decision-making group by stating:

Well, I think the challenge [with getting everyone involved] always is what if that groundswell gets crazy around going to various conferences it complicates the situation...as you know, people don't always understand the big picture. They see the world from their vantage point. So not understanding, well, yes it's a financial investment for us right now, we believe there's a long-term pay out in terms of institutional reputation and recognition and all that. Well, your average senior faculty member or general students doesn't get that much of it. So I think having the informed decision-makers at the table allow us to move quickly because we had to be ready to move and everything, all our ducks lined in a row and all those kinds of things.

### ***Role of a Strong President***

Despite having a relatively small and consistent decision-making group, participants also directly discussed about the role of presidents. At FIU, an athletic administrator stated, "Having a university president who is passionate and knowledge about athletics was absolutely critical to being able to switch conferences." An alumni administrator at Missouri stated, "If you are going to move into the SEC you better have

a chancellor who is not only knowledgeable about college sports but is nationally respected.” His colleague in enrollment management stated, “I think it made a huge difference that our chancellor was nationally recognized and engaged.” An athletic administrator at SMU described the impact of the campus president by saying, “We have a great leader, a very well-respected president. I think his leadership was the thing we used to make our case to the Big East.”

An institutional leader at SMU described the involvement of the president at their institutions as one who was, “calling the presidents of Conference USA when we were in the WAC. [He] was calling presidents in the Big East when we were in Conference USA. The ADs as well, but [he] was actively engaging in discussion.” Another institutional leader at FIU recalled the role of his president:

Leader: [He] had the authority to the make the change, but the issue was to make sure the Board was aligned with that, and we did that.

Interviewer: What did [his] day-to-day role entail?

Leader: Well, the athletic director did a lot of the athletic-based preparations and duties, and [he] called current conference members and provided information about our institution and the role we could play in the new conference. [He] also worked with our general counsel to ensure everything was covered from a legal perspective.

Finally, the third institutional leader discussed his president’s the blended focus on maximizing their current conferences while access more stable conference revenue sources. He stated,

[His] focus was on keeping the Big 12 together initially. This meant calling the other campus leaders and working through our strategic planning process. When they began to erode, [he] started to field calls from other conferences that might be interested in extending membership.

### ***The Information Process***

While the participants did not identify a broad-based group of decision makers, information sharing was discussed as an important part in the process. In particular, the participants discussed the various information shared with senior academic and campus leaders, as well as students and alumni. The Faculty Athletics Representative (FAR) served at the information hub for faculty. Respondents provided little information on the role of students within the information process.

A senior student affairs administrator at SMU recalled her position within the athletic conference realignment process:

I think my role was less from a student affairs perspective and more from the perspective that I'm a member of the President's executive team. From that perspective, the President includes us on all major decisions or issues impacting the university. While I don't play a formal decision making role, the President certainly uses me in the same way he uses all the other vice presidents as advisers to what's best for the university.

A senior alumni relations administrator at the University of Missouri provided a similar role as did the senior executives at SMU:

The Chancellor and I have talked about this several times, even the AD to a certain extent, but mostly with the Chancellor. My job was to be the eyes and

ears. In a lot of ways we were. I was consistently communicating with our leadership, mostly the Chancellor, about, “I’m hearing this. I wonder ...,” or “I’m worried about this, or thinking about this. This is the big rumor of the day, or whatever.” He [the Chancellor] was so busy with just the day-to-day contacts and talking to people, especially when it got hot, that he didn’t have time to know what was being said or was happening.

The role of the FAR was also discussed among institutions. Participants described a similar philosophy around the inclusion of the FAR within the decision-making process. A senior athletic administrator at the University of Missouri recalled:

Our FAR was pretty involved with that, not necessarily in the decision-making, but in the consulting role. We were communicating with her as well as with the Chair of the Faculty Council at that time. The FAR and the Faculty Council would have been at least involved in the communication strategy, not necessarily in the decision, but making sure that they were at least involved in the communication.

An institutional leader at SMU also provided a similar philosophy related to the inclusion of the faculty and the Faculty Senate: “The faculty athletics council did not pass a resolution, they simply supported the move and let me know that and then reported it to the Faculty Senate.” A faculty member at FIU recalled his role in the process, “My opinion, as well as the opinion of the Faculty Senate was asked and we provided a recommendation; however, the final decision was made by the President and the Athletic Director.”

## Survey Results

In an attempt to quantify the findings from the three case sites, a national survey was administrated to institutions that experienced conference realignment over the past five years. The findings of the three-site case study yielded significant insight into the athletic conference realignment decision process. This survey was administered simultaneously while completing interviews at the three case sites. Results from 78 respondents to the survey provided further codification of the case study results.

### *National Survey Representation*

To test whether the proportions of respondents to the survey accurately matched the actual population of institutions previously engaged in athletic conference realignment, a chi-square goodness of fit test was conducted. Table 4, below, provides confirmation ( $p > 0.05$ ) that responses to this study's survey did not significantly differ from the actual population of institutions engaging in athletic conference realignment. This allowed for generalization to a broader set of institutions.

Table 5: Realignment Type: Goodness of Fit Test (Institutional Responses)

	<b>Expected Percentage</b>	<b>Expected Frequency</b>	<b>Observed Frequency</b>
Non-AQ to Non-AQ	51.0	10.2	6.0
Non-AQ to AQ	27.0	5.4	8.0
AQ to AQ	22.0	4.4	6.0
<i>chi-squared</i>		3.56	
<i>p-value</i>		0.1684	

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

### ***Survey Responses: Factors Impacting Athletic Conference Realignment***

Data from the three case study sites provided insight into the importance of increasing athletic and academic prestige, as well as the access to additional athletics-based revenue on the athletic conference realignment process. Survey respondents provided similar responses. Table 5 provides a ranking of factors affecting athletic conference realignment. Across each of the three different conference realignment types, institutional leaders consistently ranked access to additional conference revenues as the primary driver of conference realignment. Increasing athletic and academic prestige served as the second most influential factors in deciding to change athletic conferences. Surprisingly, survey respondents did not feel that the interest of the general student body or the preference of corporate sponsors or donors affected the decision to change athletic conferences.

Table 6: Survey Response—Factors Affecting Athletic Conference Realignment

	<b>AQ to AQ</b>	<b>Non-AQ to AQ</b>	<b>Non-AQ to Non-AQ</b>
Access to additional conference revenues	1	1	1
Increasing athletic prestige	2	5	1
Athletic competitive advantage	3	2	6
Increasing institutional prestige	3	2	3
Expansion of media “footprint”	5	11	4
Alignment with similar athletic programs	6	7	5
Athletic recruiting benefits	7	2	7
Athletic scheduling advantages	8	10	8
Increasing academic prestige	8	7	11
Alignment with similar academic institutions	10	5	12
Actions of peer institutions	11	15	10
Pressures or preferences of donors/boosters	12	14	14
Student Interest and Support	13	7	15
Decreasing travel-based expenditures	14	11	9
Creating/reconnecting athletic rivalries	14	15	13

Reduction in institutional support of athletics	16	13	16
Pressures or preferences of corporate sponsors	17	17	17

When asked on the survey about factors impacting their recent athletic conference realignment, a senior institutional leader from an institution that recently moved from a non-AQ to an AQ conference stated:

The continued pressures on the Bowl Championship Series, including the media and public pressures for a playoff system. This, in addition to previous pressures from the Big Six and the other Division I-A schools, were a major factor in realignment and participating in the increased revenues available with the BCS and a playoff TV contract. Added to this were the pressures of sports TV and other outlets, and the competition for college sports programming, particularly football. Conferences realized that the enhanced value could be gained from their TV contracts as a result of more “quantity” as well as additional operating dollars for the university.

A student affairs professional at an institution moving from a non-AQ to an AQ conference further characterized the desire for prestige through the realignment process by saying, “the ultimate driver was we wanted to be associated academically with schools in the new conference.”

#### ***Survey Responses: Campus-Based Actors***

Survey respondents also provided validation of the experiences at the three case study sites in terms of the institutional decision makers. Table 6 provides the average score of importance for each of the campus actors involved in the athletic conference

realignment process. The results from the survey illustrated a clear delineation of who the primary actors are within athletic conference realignments. Respondents identified presidents, athletic directors, and the Boards of Trustees as the primary decision makers. Members of the faculty senate and the general student body were rated the lowest, providing additional evidence for the lack of conversation about their roles during the interviews.

Table 7: Survey Response—Influence of Campus Actors on Decisions

<b>University Role /Position</b>	<b>Average Score (out of 4.0)</b>
President's/Chief Executive Officer's Office	3.96
Athletic Director	3.63
Board of Trustees or Similar	3.58
University General Counsel or Legal Team	2.78
University Communication Department	2.41
Donors or Benefactors	2.22
Provost's/Chief Academic Officer's Office	2.07
Athletic Corporate Sponsors	1.96
Students	1.56
Faculty Senate	1.48

When asked about the decision-making process and the primary actors, a senior institutional leader from an institution realigning between two AQ conferences noted, “there was strong communication between the President and Athletic Director.” A senior academic administrator at an institution transitioning between a non-AQ to an AQ conference described the decision-making group as containing, “The university president and the athletic director.” He continued, “The Board of Trustees played a large role in the final decision making; however, the day-to-day information gathering and discussion rested with the President and the Athletic Director.”

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 provided the results from document analysis, in-depth interviews with participations, and results from the nationally-representative survey. Each provided key contextual findings around the athletic conference realignment decision. The emergence of a discourse counter to that of the public narrative connecting conference realignment entirely to the generating of additional athletic revenue is an important finding.

Additionally, the role of athletics in promoting an institution's brand was discussed by both interview participants and confirmed by survey respondents. Finally, the differences in strategic planning and decision making based on current membership in an AQ conference illustrated an important difference between the power dynamics associated with already accessing elite athletic conference membership.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The advent of intercollegiate athletics within American higher education has fundamentally changed the culture on college campuses. The increasing public interest in and discourse on college sports has placed intercollegiate athletics as one of higher education's most-publicized entities. Institutions now use their intercollegiate athletic programs as a means to not only promote their athletic brand, but also their academic prestige. College sports serve as the public's introduction to institutions of higher education (Toma, 2003), and athletic conference membership serves as the benchmark of institutional status and prestige (Toma, 2003).

The results of this study indicate that the process of athletic conference realignment is more complex and involved than portrayed by mainstream media. The influential actors within the process shed light on the potential role of future athletic conference realignment. The research questions that guided this study and directed the presentation of the implications are as follows:

- RQ1: What are the primary factors affecting athletic conference realignment?
- RQ2: What roles do various academic and institutional leaders play in broad-based athletic decisions about athletic conference membership?
- RQ3: How do key concepts of resource dependence theory, institutional theory, and principal-agent theory explain athletic conference realignment at Division I-A institutions?

### **Primary Factors Affecting Athletic Conference Realignment**

In answering the first research question, the participants discussed similar factors driving athletic conference realignment across the three types of conference moves. The common discourse around athletic conference realignment centers on access to additional athletics-based revenue through media rights and conference distributions. However, for the institutions in this study, there appeared to be a complex interplay between the increasing institutional prestige, visibility, and access to new revenue streams as the primary factors affecting conference realignment.

The experiences at FIU provide an example of the interplay between these complex factors, as they not only considered increasing their athletic and academic prestige through conference memberships, but also increasing their institutional visibility by expanding their market footprint. Similarly, administrators at SMU discussed how to expand their brand into a strategic student recruiting base. The experiences of institutions moving from a non-AQ conference to either another non-AQ conference or an AQ conference exhibit *competitive isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), whereby market forces drive the decision to increase prestige.

Unlike *competitive isomorphism* for institutions moving from a non-AQ conference, institutions already positioned within an AQ conference with access to AQ revenue and prominence exhibited characteristics of resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In particular, UM's decision was centered on stabilizing athletic revenues rather than accessing additional revenues. Institutional leaders at UM also discussed the desire to access a conference in which revenues are equitably allocated. For

UM, there was a small increase in athletic revenue when moving from the Big 12 to the SEC; however, access to stable and equitable revenue mattered more.

While access to additional athletics-based revenue was a constant underlying concept for conference membership, it was somewhat surprising to find that the prominence placed on increasing institutional visibility and the reach of each university's brand drove the athletic conference realignment decision as much as access to additional athletics-based revenues. Respondents did not shy away from the conversation about increases in athletics-based revenues associated with conference realignment. However, there were unique perspectives between their institutions' transitions from a non-AQ conference and those already located within an AQ conference.

For institutions such as FIU and SMU, their decision-making about athletic realignment considered accessing additional athletics-based revenues to support additional expenses that come with an increase in athletic conference prestige. For UM, which already had access to revenues associated with an AQ conference, realignment was not predicated on increasing revenue, but rather based more on accessing stable and equitable revenue distribution. While athletics-revenue played a role in the decision-making process, there was a distinct difference in the way it was contextualized.

The utilization of athletics as the mechanism to increase an institution's brand and reach served as the most overt and consistent theme across each of the three case study sites. Confirming the notions of Suggs (2011), in which athletics serve as the "front porch" for an institution, leaders at the three sites discussed increasing institutional reach and branding through athletics-based TV exposure. Institutional leaders also discussed the opportunity for the institutions to participate in athletic competitions outside of their

traditionally-regional areas. Accessing these non-traditional regional sites creates additional opportunities for alumni to remain engaged with university-based events (Bruning et al., 2006; Toma, 2003).

At each of the three institutions, the institution's president or chancellor discussed the strategic use of athletic conference realignment as a catalyst to broaden their institutional brand and reach. Each of the three institutions routinely discussed the notion that athletic conference realignment could increase applications and enrollments, thus confirming the research of Murphy and Trandel (1996). For SMU, joining the Big East was an effective way for an institution that is primarily known in the South and West to increase its prominence and recruiting in the Northeast corridor. UM had a foothold with students in the Big 12 and Big Ten regional areas (Midwest area), but had a strategic mission to expand visibility and enrollments from the Southeast, thus incentivizing its decision to join the Southeastern Conference. FIU, by joining a conference that spans 10 states, created an opportunity for the university to promote its academic programs and increase enrollments in states from which it had not previously drawn. This exposure for a young institution created a competitive advantage relative to its peers. For all institutions, athletics served as an efficient and effective way to publicize their institutions, confirming the results of Pope and Pope (2009). The alignment within a conference that routinely traveled to targeted recruitment areas allowed institutional administrators to build a presence and start the brand integration process.

The last factor that affected athletic conference realignment was the inherent decision to utilize athletic conference realignment as an opportunity to increase athletic and academic prestige. This increase in prestige was achieved by moving to a new

athletic conference that had institutions viewed as both athletic and academic aspirational peers. For FIU, there was a conscious decision to utilize athletic conference realignment as a means to align with other public institutions that operated within an urban environment. Specifically, FIU discussed the benefit of aligning with a public urban institution, such as the University of Alabama, Birmingham (UAB), as well as academically-elite institutions, such as Rice University, as a mechanism to gain legitimacy without substantial investment in the academic enterprise. Both Rice and UAB represented strategic partners that would strengthen FIU's athletic and academic reputation.

For SMU, there was an effort to align with the elite private institutional membership of the Big East. In particular, SMU leaders discussed the opportunity to realign with private institutions such as Georgetown and Syracuse. Moving from a conference that is primarily regionally focused and populated with public institutions, SMU viewed athletic conference realignment into the Big East as an opportunity to become associated with institutions with shared similar missions and challenges associated with being a private institution.

Finally, the culture and prior year's realignment within the Big 12 created an environment for UM, which was looking to realign with other AAU institutions and counter current inequity and marginalization. Southeastern Conference membership provided alignment with more AAU institutions along with access to stable athletic revenues. The alignment with other academically-elite institutions was a key motivator for UM throughout both its flirtation with the Big Ten and ultimate move to the Southeastern Conference.

Scholars (Goidel & Hamilton, 2006; Lovaglia & Lucas, 2005; Trenkamp, 2007) have discussed the institutional prestige and rankings associated with intercollegiate athletic sponsorship. Each of the three institutions discussed the potential increased prestige associated with the conference realignment process. While decisions to realign centered on prestige-seeking behaviors, there was an underlying theme that any conference realignment would represent an increase in athletic competition and prestige. Institutions operated under the assumption that within Division I-A, no institution would leave its current athletic conference for one that did not provide increased athletic and/or academic benefits. This distinction is important, as it informs the decision-making process.

### **The Decision-Making Process**

While there was a similarity with the primary factors that influenced athletic conference realignment, the decision-making process varied across institutions depending on the current placement of the institution within the athletic conference hierarchy. Drawbacks and prior experiences with failed realignment were shared commonalities; however, institutions maintained a level of independence in the way they viewed the decision-making process. As Duderstadt (2001) postulated, the role of a strong president or institutional leader to ensure effective management of the intercollegiate athletics was a common theme discussed across each of the three conference realignment types.

### ***Differences in Strategic Planning for Conference Realignment***

In discussing the realignment strategic planning, both institutions transitioning from a non-AQ conference (FIU and SMU) discussed a narrow and strategic investment in preparing for conference realignment. As Clotfelter (2012) stated, athletic conferences

are “essentially invitation-only clubs” (p. 82). FIU and SMU both acted in a manner aimed at increasing the likelihood of receiving such an invitation to a more elite non-AQ or AQ conference by investing in facility development, institutional capacity, and/or athletic success. The strategic investment by non-AQ conference members was different than the approach of the University of Missouri. Given that UM is in a position of power with its current membership in an AQ conference; it concentrated its efforts on maximizing the current situation through institutional collaboration and increasing the influence of its current conference.

In particular, FIU exhibited a singular focus in obtaining access to the “next step of the ladder.” This approach is partly due to the infancy of the institution, but it was also a product of its membership in a non-elite, non-AQ conference. Administrators and campus leaders at FIU stressed the strategic plan for constantly growing the University’s reputation and placement with more academically- and athletically-elite institutions. These desires manifested in the building of large-scale athletic facilities, the adoption of a Division-I football program, the push to increase faculty research and granting activities, and institutional investment in college sports. Finally, FIU was actively and proactively promoting its brand and the potential benefits of its institutions to conferences looking to expand within the realignment process. In talking with administrators, this process felt like an all-hands-on-deck situation, where both the athletic director and president pushed for such a move, given the potential benefits of realignment.

SMU, an institution that moved from a non-AQ to an AQ conference, exhibited similar thoughts about planning for conference realignment. The remodeling of its basketball arena, hiring of high-powered men’s basketball and football coaches, and the

rebranding of the institution away from a Southern and religious mission to simply SMU, all signaled to potential AQ conferences that SMU was committed to increasing athletic success. What was different about SMU, compared to FIU, was that the promotion of the institution to potential conferences appeared to be primarily the job of the president—similar to the sentiments of Duderstadt (2001), who discussed the need for a strong institutional leader within elite athletic programs. The athletic director at SMU focused on maximizing athletic success within the school’s current conference. Given the elevated prestige of SMU’s former conference, its dual focus is not surprising, as it needed to maintain its placement in the current conference if realignment did not occur.

The primary differences arose when looking at the strategic preparations for athletic conference realignment at UM, which already had access to prestige and heightened athletics-based revenue streams. Administrators at UM discussed a commitment to maximize their current situation rather than trying to gain access to a “better opportunity.” Unlike FIU and SMU, UM’s daily athletic and academic decisions were made to enhance the school’s influence within the Big 12 and not as part of a larger strategic plan to gain access into the SEC or another conference. This point refutes the claims of Thamel (2011), who stated that realignment decisions are a strategic process that each institution actively pursues.

This constant desire to increase prestige through athletic conference membership was evident in both FIU and SMU, each of which changed its athletic conference twice over the past seven years. Both institutions exhibited a strategic commitment to use athletic conference membership as a conduit to accomplish institutional priorities. UM, however, remained in the Big 12 Conference for over 100 years and only entertained an

offer to join the SEC once questions surrounding the Big 12's stability arose. Access to the prestige associated with an AQ conference served as incentive enough to maximize UM's current situation rather than making decisions to prepare for the next conference opportunity, as with SMU and FIU.

### **Campus Actors**

The second aim of this study was to address the roles of various campus actors in the athletic conference realignment process. The extant literature discusses the impact of institutional presidents (Duderstadt, 2003), athletic directors (Bailey & Littleton, 1991), and corporate partners (Willihnganz, 2007) within the athletic decision-making process. Hirko (2011) postulated that athletic directors were the campus players who held all three components of power and influence within college sports. Hirko went further to theorize that alumni, boosters, and members of the faculty yielded the least influence in athletics-based decisions.

In all three institutions, the decision-making process was facilitated by the same group of individuals: president, athletic director, and board of trustees. At all three institutions, the presidents and athletic directors managed the day-to-day conversations and negotiations while the boards of trustees were brought into the process to serve as legitimizing entities to codify the decision to change athletic conferences. Administrators at each of the three institutions rationalized the small and isolated group of decision makers around athletic conference realignment as a direct response to the sensitivity of the conference realignment process. These institutions also provided a clear description of the need to control information and gain stakeholder opinions while balancing potential institutional isolation from their current conference members.

The consistency of the findings led to a possible addition to the framework provided by Hirko (2011). The results of this study provide support for the level of authority and decision-making influence of the primary campus actors—presidents and athletic directors. However, Hirko’s framework failed to capture the influence of institutional boards. The findings of this study suggest the inclusion of the institutional boards as entities that not only yielded power but legitimacy as well. Within Hirko’s framework, this result would place boards of trustees on the same level with presidents in terms of power and influence.

Building from the small and isolated decision-making group, each campus appeared to marginalize the influence of the faculty, general student body, and student-athletes. While these actors were informed—to a varying degree at each campus—they did not have a formalized role in the decision to change athletic conferences. The loosely-coupled nature of the academic enterprise silos the governance structure. It is unclear if the lack of faculty involvement was related to a lack of interest (Lawrence & Ott, 2009) or a marginalization of their role.

The lack of impact of the faculty members was personified by number of refusals to participate by faculty members. Of the twelve refusals to participate, eleven of them held a faculty appointment or served in a student affairs capacity. The high refusal rate of the faculty members and student affairs administrators illustrates the isolated decision-making process around conference realignment. While the Faculty Athletics Representatives (FAR) were provided updates, they rarely played an active voice in the decision-making process.

In addition to the commonalities around the composition of their decision-making team, a consistent theme emerged among these institutions around the presence of a strong institutional leader. Beyond strength, participants at each of the three sites responded consistently by describing their institution's president as knowledgeable about intercollegiate athletics, possessing national respect for institutional management, and being engaged in the national college sports scene. At SMU, the president is the co-chair of a national advocacy group of college presidents for the strategic management of athletics. At UM, the chancellor at the time of conference realignment was not only the chair of the Big 12 Conference, but also served on a number of state and national committees and boards. At FIU, the president most recently served as the chancellor for the Board of Governors of the State University System of Florida—building a number of politically-connected partners. These roles seemed to support the goals for institutional change and realignment.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The third and final research question proposed in this study examined the athletic conference realignment process through the lenses of three different organizational theories. In particular, this study attempted to codify athletic conference realignment by the processes of neo-institutionalism, resource dependence, and principal-agent theories. As applied to higher education and intercollegiate athletics, the institutional and neo-institutional theories focus on the isomorphic behaviors of institutions that gradually become similar over time despite campus and historical differences (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; 1991). In particular, theorists prescribing to neo-institutionalism view organizational behavior through three processes: 1) coercive, 2) mimetic, and 3)

normative. Each of these processes contributes to the isomorphic behavior that is the foundation of institutional theory.

While neo-institutionalism provides a plausible explanation for athletic conference realignment, the nature of intercollegiate athletics and the role of athletics-based finances lead to the potential for an alternative explanation for engaging in realignment: resource dependence theory. Resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) contends that organizations depend on external resources for survival and, in turn, tend to rely on these external organizations to shape their identities and direction. In this case, the external forces of athletic conferences' access to additional revenue incentives are a consistent drive to access such revenue through conference realignment. At its core, resource dependence theory highlights the primary goals of survival, autonomy, and power.

The interplay between neo-institutionalism and resource dependence theory may explain the theoretical reasoning for engaging in athletic conference realignment, and contextualizing the role of institutional leaders is important in understanding the entire process. Principal-agent theory attempts to examine the interactions between key actors and the established relationship between the university presidents (principal) and the athletic director (agent) as they engage in athletic conference realignment possibilities.

### ***Neoinstitutionalism***

Applying the core concepts of isomorphism to the current study provides a rich grounding of the results in theory. Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) both propose that isomorphism provides a bridging agent for institutional

environments by imposing rules within their structures. Organizations engaging in such behavior then become more homogeneous and similar in structure over time.

In particular, institutions that expressed a desire to increase their athletic and academic prestige through conference realignment can be partly explained through mimetic isomorphism. Accordingly, institutions such as SMU and FIU engaged in realignment because, in part, of the assumption that they could duplicate the actions of other institutions and strategically align themselves with institutions that would enhance placement within the academy. This strategic alignment was done with both academic and athletic functions in mind. Specifically, coercive isomorphism, which is the adopting of structures and rules in an effort to increase prestige, was present in institutions moving from a non-AQ conference. The hiring of high-profile coaches along with the construction or renovations of athletic facilities can be viewed as adoption of perceived structural needs to gain access to a more elite athletic conference. Finally, normative isomorphism was present for non-AQ conference members through the perceptions of the athletic and academic professionals, who viewed upgrading athletic conferences as an opportunity to access additional athletic revenues and increase overall prestige.

Specifically for SMU, the primary motivation to engage in athletic conference realignment was rooted in a sense of belonging with institutions already established in more elite AQ conferences. The “death penalty” not only impacted the short-term success of SMU’s football team, but also impacted its potential inclusion in the initial Big 12 conference expansion in 1990. Despite the deep-seeded belief that it should be included in an AQ conference, in its post-“death penalty” era, SMU continued to act like its current conference partners rather than aspirational schools. For example, SMU’s

coaches' salaries and facilities mirror that of their current conference partner rather than the multi-million-dollar contracts that are present in AQ conferences. It was not until SMU invested in both high-profile men's basketball and football coaches along with upgrading its basketball arena that potential AQ conferences viewed them as a potential legitimate member. This reduction in the uncertainty of SMU's athletic viability (mimetic isomorphism) potentially reduced AQ conference members' concerns and opened the door for potential membership.

The explanations of FIU's choices are more direct and less rooted in prior experiences. For FIU, athletics served as a consistent mechanism to increase institutional prestige since institutional inception. The normative isomorphism of adopting Division-I football, prior to moving any other sport(s) into Division I competition, combined with the coercive engagement in the athletic facilities "arms" race, further signifies the conformity of the next-step in the athletic conference hierarchy. FIU's ultimate goal is to reach AQ conference membership; however, it continues to mimic the behaviors of members in their targeted next conference. For example, FIU continued to increase the number of seats in its football stadium from approximately 20,000 when entering the Sun Belt conference and 45,000 prior to entering Conference USA. Each time, the size of their football stadium conformed to the norm of its entering conference.

Brewer, Gates, and Goldman (2005) determined that "student quality, research, and sports" were the primary areas in which prestige was gained and lost (p. 29). Institutional leaders viewed opportunities through conference realignment as a way to not only increase athletic prominence, but also the national pool of applicants in the hope of enhancing the quality of incoming students. Institutional leaders reflected similar

sentiments to Goff (2000), who stated that “athletics is an integral source of name exposure for almost every university and often the only frequent source of exposure for schools possessing little in the way of academic reputation” (p. 91). This opportunity to increase exposure through an institution’s secondary brand on athletics (Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008) outweighed the potential increases in athletics-based expenses.

### ***Resource Dependence Theory***

The concepts discussed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) pertaining to resource dependence theory provide a meaningful framework through which to view potential revenue-seeking behaviors. In short, resource dependence theory postulates that power and resource dependence are directly linked where a given organization’s power over another is directly equal to the dependency that organization has on the other’s resources. This theory provides a useful approach to the understanding the behaviors of UM, an institution moving between two AQ conferences. The motivation to change athletic conferences at UM was an attempt to access a more stable and equitable conference-based revenue source rather than access additional dollars.

The inequitable revenue distribution within the Big 12 created a differentiated power structure where the University of Texas and University of Oklahoma yield more power and influence within the Big 12, due in part to their access to additional revenue. UM’s attempt to restore their individual power within a conference resulted in seeking out a stable conference that allocated external revenues equally across member institutions, thus, according to resource dependence theory, distributing power in the same equitable manner. UM increased its athletic power by accessing additional revenues through the new media rights deal within the Southeastern Conference. This experience

was also true for FIU and SMU, which will access additional revenues, in time, and, therefore, increase their power within the intercollegiate athletic landscape. SMU and FIU's increased power was a secondary byproduct of their legitimizing conference realignment.

Unlike SMU and FIU, UM did not need to engage in behaviors to legitimize its placement in big-time college sports, as it already had done such through its membership in the Big 12 Conference. UM's concerns were primarily focused on maximizing power and organizational security. Its engagement in the athletic conference realignment process was about exploiting the power associated with equal distribution of the conference revenues in the Southeastern Conference, rather than the skewed power dynamics of the Big 12.

Beyond individual decisions around athletic conference realignment, resource dependence theory provides a useful framework from which to describe athletic conference realignment as a whole. Since 2004, only one institution has engaged in realignment that resulted in a decrease in prestige. Conferences are looking to increase their own access to power and revenues. This desire often manifests itself in the expansion of conference membership and the invitation of institutions that bring additional television markets to increase negotiating power. This desire to enhance conference membership would explain both the lateral moves between similar conferences as well as the upward mobility between non-AQ and AQ conferences. For conferences, television contracts are the primary source of revenue. AQ conferences are often perceived based on the size of television contract and partnerships—a market

indicator of interest. Conferences' quest for power and influence is directly tied to the size of television revenues.

### ***Principal-Agent Theory***

Nwosu (2012) and Reade (2010) found that principal-agent theory was useful in describing the interplay between athletic organizations and their governing host.

However, Dial (2013) failed to find a theoretical link between the concepts of principal-agent theory and Division III athletic department and the university administration. At the core of principal-agent theory, there is a level of mistrust, rooted in negative attitudes toward human interactions, between the principal and the agent (Olson, 2000). This mistrust manifests into competing goals.

Principal-agent theory articulates that there must be a conflict between the principal and agent, suggesting, for this study, that senior university administrators employ athletic administrators to serve the interests of the institution. Furthermore, principal-agent theory states that the interests of both parties are often in a state of dissonance (Hill & Jones, 1992; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Ross, 1973). Dial (2013) stated that despite not explaining the management of Division III athletics, principal-agent theory may provide a useful lens through which to view Division I athletics. Contrary to the work of the Nwosu (2012) and Reade (2010), this study found that principal-agent theory does little to describe the relationships between the administration and the athletic department during an athletic conference realignment decision. In part, the lack of explanatory power through principal-agent theory is potentially due to the uniqueness of incentives produced by a conference realignment decision. In each of the three cases, the presidents and athletic directors articulated the common goals of

increasing athletic and academic prestige as well generating additional athletics-based revenues.

At SMU, there was a level of trust between the athletic director and university president. In particular, the athletic director exhibited knowledge of common goals with the president. The primary role of the athletic director was to focus on maximizing current athletic success while trusting the university president to play a prominent role in negotiating entrance into the Big East Conference. This trust in the president to take on athletics-based negotiations exemplifies the inherent trust between the principal and agent that is not traditionally associated with this theoretical approach.

At UM, the athletic director and president remained in constant communication and worked together to navigate realignment between the Big 12, Big Ten, and Southeastern conferences. Specifically, both the president and athletic director attended meetings, negotiated opportunism, and engaged with stakeholders. At UM, trust was personified through constant collaboration rather than the transition of duties, as seen at SMU.

Finally, both the president and athletic directors at Florida International University shared an interest in advancing institutional prestige and prominence as well as in expanding the institution's reach beyond South Florida. The president at FIU relied on the athletic expertise of the athletic director throughout the negotiations, while the athletic director relied on the external connections and reputation of the president. The alignment of the goals and trust was evident through the institution's president as the ultimate decision-making authority on an athletic membership matter—a decision that traditionally rests with the athletic director.

Olson (2000) provides a potential explanation to why the principal-agent theory failed to provide an adequate framework to explain the inter-organizational relationships during athletic conference realignment. Olson purported that, “in a not-for-profit organization, there are no residual claims to be paid out and no owners expecting to earn a profit” (p. 283). Olson further stated that principal-agent theory has difficulty explaining inter-organizational relationships within non-profit institutions because units within nonprofit organizations are required to coexist. However, these inter-organizational entities can also choose the extent of their collaborative action. To this end, athletic conference realignment represented a decision where both the goals of the university—increasing prestige—and the athletic department—increasing athletic competition—could be achieved through a single unified decision. In this instance, athletic and university administrators made a conscious choice to coexist.

The dependency of institutional presidents and athletic directors on one another to ensure completion of realignment serves as the primary evidence refuting the applicability of principal-agent theory to explain the relationship among institutional actors during conference realignment. While athletic directors hold the athletic expertise, they each lacked the institutional authority necessary to make such a change. This authority lies with the presidents, in conjunction with institutional boards. This dichotomy creates an environment of mutual dependence rather than systematic distrust. Other athletic activities, such as student-athlete special admissions, may present an environment where the goals of the institution are not aligned with the athletic director. These instances may provide a more appropriate application of principal-agent theory.

## **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study indicate several practical findings for athletic administrators and campus leaders. In particular, understanding the commonalities and differences between the various types of athletic conference realignments is important. While the data articulate common themes, it is important for institutions considering athletic conference realignment to understand that the consistently-shifting landscape of intercollegiate athletics creates unique circumstances for each institution. As evident within this study, athletic conference realignment appears to be an institutional strategy to increase institutional visibility and brand extension. As the president of SMU stated, the decision to move to the Big East was, in large part, a mechanism to gain a presence in the northeast portion of the United States. SMU experienced a positive increase in student applications and enrollments from the Northeast, as well as Missouri, within the Southeast.

Contrary to media discourse, athletic conference realignment is not solely a product of increasing financial gains. At least in the short term, all three institutions increased their athletic operating expenses more than they did their athletics-based revenues. While long term there may access to additional revenues, athletic administrators and campus leaders must understand that athletic conference realignment is an investment and should be viewed as a possible conduit for increases in institutional prestige and athletic success.

Institutional leadership is a key component of the athletic conference realignment process. Across all three institutions, their institutional leaders exhibited knowledge about athletics, strong strategic planning, and a national reputation for institutional leadership

and athletic management. These characteristics were particularly present in institutions entering AQ conferences. As institutions look to utilize athletics as a mechanism to increase athletic and academic prestige, it is important that they look to their campus leadership. A strong and knowledgeable president not only provides a solid foundation for the integration of athletics into the campus culture, but it also signals the membership of potential conferences that the institution has the capacity and leadership to succeed.

Finally, the results of this study indicated the complexities and sensitivities of athletics-based decisions. Beyond NCAA regulations, administrators provided rationalizations for why athletic decisions are made with few actors involved. This decision-making approach is unlike other aspects of higher education, where collegiality and consensus building are cornerstones. It is important to educate stakeholders on the differences in the decision-making process, as it could alleviate future concerns around athletics-based decisions.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the notions of loose coupling (Weick, 1976), where higher education institutions have “softer” links between each academic and student service unit, provide a useful approach to viewing athletic departments. Weick (1976) postulates that the administrative side of higher education exhibits tighter links than the academic core. The faculty and academic units have the added advantages of localized freedom of adaptation, more local independence, responding to fewer environmental changes, isolating weak units and cutting down on coordination overhead. The notion of tight administrative coupling was visible at institutions during the athletic conference realignment process, where university presidents and athletic directors collaborated in all facets of decision-making. The autonomous nature of faculty and academic units lead to

their limited involvement within the conference realignment process. The soft link between athletics and academics both shields academics from potential scandal and limits their involvement in athletic oversight.

### ***Limitations***

Although the findings of this study yielded significant insights into the athletic conference realignment process at Division I-A institutions, it is important to recognize that several components of this study limit its generalizability to other postsecondary and athletic settings. Primarily, this study employed a qualitative methodology, which by its very nature limited the ability of the findings to be generalized to the broader population. The use of direct quotations whenever possible is purposeful to allow the readers to apply the findings to their own institutional settings. Furthermore, this study utilized three distinct institutional sites to analyze athletic conference realignment. Even within Division I-A, a number of different types of athletic programs exist, and readers should recall that the findings of this study are limited to institutional types included within this study.

In addition, this study asked participants to recall discussions and important factors for a decision made two to three years prior. The time elapse might have increased the time to reflect on the decision-making process and to reinterpret the institutional results. This time elapse was addressed by engaging institutions in which realignment occurred during the past three years. Additionally, participants selected for interviews were limited to individuals who were employed at the institutions during the realignment process and had first-hand knowledge of the realignment process.

### ***Opportunities for Future Research***

For researchers interested in the athletic conference realignment process, this study served as a foundation for building a comprehensive research agenda around athletic conference realignment. The most obvious extension of this research is to examine the short- and long-term impacts of athletic conference realignment on academic and athletic outcomes. Utilizing large-scale datasets, this approach would help quantify the impacts of athletic conference realignment and the expected benefits of making such a move.

The athletic conference realignment process combines both the push (institutional desire to make the move) and the pull (interest from the conference). This study focused on the push factors. Institutional leaders provide assumptions on what might have been some of the pull factors from athletic conferences; however, gaining further insight into the salient factors that interest athletic conferences would provide institutional leaders with strategic information on how to position their institution for future realignments.

An additional intriguing prospect would be to apply a similar analytical approach to the Division II and Division III institutions. The majority of research on intercollegiate athletics focuses on Division I-A programs. A study focused on these institutions could provide an opportunity to compare and contrast the experiences of institutions competing within Divisions I, II, and/or III.

The inability for the principal-agent theory to explain the interplay among institutional actors during athletic conference realignment represents an opportunity for future exploration. In particular, the application of additional theoretical frameworks may enhance the understanding of the athletic conference realignment process. Both the

normative and political perspectives of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) or academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) provide alternative approaches to understanding the interplay between revenue-seeking and visibility increases associated with athletic conference realignment. Additionally, these two approaches may also explain the role of various campus actors in the decision-making process.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors influencing athletic conference realignment. In addition, this study examined the role of various institutional actors within the decision-making process. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of neo-institutionalism, resource dependency theory, and principal-agent theory, results from this study depicted an exchange between prestige-seeking behaviors and revenue maximization, from both academic and athletic enterprises. Across all three athletic conference realignment types, academic and institutional leaders discussed the role of athletics in extending the brand of the university and increasing institutional reputation by associating with an increasingly more elite set of athletic and academic peers.

The role of a strong institutional leader and the involvement of university presidents and boards of trustees indicated that the athletic conference realignment process was an institution-wide decision, rather than a decision made with competing interests. The small and controlled decision-making group was a direct response to the sensitivity and high-stakes nature of athletic conference realignment. While alignment with prestigious academic peers was discussed as a primary rationale for engaging in conference realignment, faculty members and the FAR played a small role within the decision-making process.

Results from this study can help to inform future conference realignment decisions. Findings on the interplay between the academic and athletic enterprise provide insight into the way universities can utilize athletic programs to increase their athletic and academic prestige. Finally, this study refutes the public discourse that athletic-conference realignment is entirely about accessing additional revenues and provides further insight into the complex nature of athletics-based decisions.

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## APPENDIX A

### General Interview Protocol

1. Briefly explain the recent athletic conference realignment that {institution's name goes here} completed?
2. In your opinions what were the reasons / anticipatory benefits of switching from {old conference} to {new conference}?
3. Could you please describe primary decision-makers (i.e., campus individuals) who were part core of the decision-making process?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: Which office and/or individual spearheaded the effort?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: What was the role of your office throughout the decision-making process?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: When did your office get involved with in the decision-making process?
4. Describe why you decided to switch athletic conferences?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: Did the level of institutional subsidy to athletics play a role?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: Did the process monitor the actions and decisions of peer institutions? (Athletic or academic)
  - [FOLLOW UP]: What role did athletic-based revenues play in the decision?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: What student-athlete welfare considered? If so, does the athletic conference realignment help or hinder the welfare of student-athletes?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: What role did the President's / Chancellors Office play?
5. From your perspective, what were the major drawbacks from leaving your former conference?
  - [FOLLOW UP – AD]: How are these drawbacks different than those of other campus leaders in academic or student affairs?
  - [FOLLOW UP – Academics / FAR]: How are these drawbacks different than those of other campus leaders in athletics?
6. Please describe the various campus offices / entities that were involved in the decision to realignment athletic conferences?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: What role did the President's / Chancellors Office play?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: Is this an atypical role for this office in terms of athletic management?
  - [FOLLOW UP]: How much influence did the President's / Chancellor's Office have on the outcome of the decision-making?

- [FOLLOW UP]:      What role did the Faculty Athletics Representative play?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      Is this an atypical role for the FAR in terms of athletic management?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      How much influence did the FAR's opinion / suggestions have on the outcome of the decision-making?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      What role did the Faculty senate play?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      Is this an atypical role for the Faculty Senate in terms of athletic management?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      How much influence did the Faculty Senate's opinion / suggestions have on the outcome of the decision-making?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      What role did the general students play? What about student-athletes?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      Is this an atypical role for the students in terms of athletic management?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      How much influence did the student's opinion / suggestions have on the outcome of the decision-making?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      What role did the Student Affairs / Dean of Students play?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      Is this an atypical role for the Dean of Students in terms of athletic management?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      How much influence did the Dean of Students opinion / suggestions have on the outcome of the decision-making?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      What role did the Board of Trustees play?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      Is this an atypical role for the Board of Trustees in terms of athletic management?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      How much influence did the Board of Trustees opinion / suggestions have on the outcome of the decision-making?
7. Please describe level of influence outside entities had on the decision process?
- [FOLLOW UP]:      Alumni / Boosters
- [FOLLOW UP]:      Corporate Sponsors
- [FOLLOW UP]:      Media

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Informed Consent Document

#### UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

##### Identifying Institutional Determinants and the Role of Institutional Leaders in Athletic Conference Realignment: A Case Study Analysis

##### **Researcher's Statement**

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can choose whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

**Principal Investigator:** Robert Toutkoushian, Ph.D.  
Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia  
Email: [rtoutkou@uga.edu](mailto:rtoutkou@uga.edu)  
Phone: (706) 542-0577

**Co-Investigator:** Dennis A. Kramer II  
Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia  
Email: [dkramer@uga.edu](mailto:dkramer@uga.edu)  
Phone: (714) 514-6442

##### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to expand the scholarly research on the factors impacting athletic decision-making and role of academic and athletic leaders in the decision-making process. The research will focus on the role of potential institutional determinants on athletic conference realignment decisions.

##### **Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to ...

- Complete a one-hour semi-structure interview about your opinions and experiences with your institution's recent athletic conference realignment. This interview will be audio recorded to ensure accurate presentation of your thoughts and opinions. Copies of the audio tape and transcripts can be requested.
- Second, you will be asked to complete a short 10-minute online survey after the completion of the interview. This survey is conducted online and does not need to be complete immediately following. Your answers on the survey will be kept anonymous and without institutional affiliations.

**Risks and discomforts**

- I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

**Benefits**

- This study begins to provide information to higher education and intercollegiate athletic leaders on the decision-making process around athletic conference realignment.
- Results from the interviews and data analysis examine the interplay between the academic core and athletic departments in making large-scale institution-wide decision.
- Conclusions for this study will begin to inform future policy and decision-making processes.

**Incentives for participation**

This study does not provide any monetary incentives for participation. However, a copy of the results and/or policy brief on the data will be provided upon request.

**Confidentiality and Audio/Video Recording**

To ensure the appropriation and accurate representation of your opinions and experiences, this interview will be recorded. Please note that the audio files will be kept until this study is completed, at that time they will be destroyed. You may have access to your personal audio file and transcript at any time through request of the principal investigator. In addition, your responses will be anonymized and presented with a description of your institutional position rather than your name.

Please provide initials below if you agree to have this interview (*specify audio or video*) recorded or not. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not want to have this interview recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am willing to have this interview recorded.

**Taking part is voluntary**

Your participation in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If during the interview process you decide that you can no longer participate, you may withdraw at any time and request the deletion of your audio file. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still participate in this study. In addition, the principal investigator may withdraw you from this research if the circumstances arise which warrant such action.

Please note that any withdrawal from this study is done without penalty. You are not waiving legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this study. For additional information on your rights as a participant please contact the UGA IRB Board at 706.542.3199 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu)

**If you have questions**

The main researcher conducting this study is Dennis A. Kramer II a doctoral candidate within the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Dennis Kramer at [dkramer@uga.edu](mailto:dkramer@uga.edu) or (714) 514-6442. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

**Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:**

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Dennis A. Kramer II  
Name of Researcher



\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

## APPENDIX C

### Realignment Survey Instrument

#### UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

##### Identifying Institutional Determinants and the Role of Institutional Leaders in Athletic Conference Realignment: A Case Study Analysis

###### **Researcher's Statement**

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can choose whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form can be printed on this current screen.

**Principal Investigator:** Robert Toutkoushian, Ph.D.  
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**Co- Investigator:** Dennis A. Kramer II  
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Phone: (714) 514-6442

###### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to expand the scholarly research on the factors impacting athletic decision-making and role of academic and athletic leaders in the decision-making process. The research will focus on the role of potential institutional determinants on athletic conference realignment decisions.

###### **Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to ...

- You will be asked to complete a short 10-minute online survey. This survey is conducted online and does not need to be complete immediately following. Your answers on the survey will be kept confidential and without institutional affiliations.

###### **Risks and discomforts**

- I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

###### **Benefits**

- This study begins to provide information to higher education and intercollegiate athletic leaders on the decision-making process around athletic conference realignment.
- Results from the interviews and data analysis examine the interplay between the academic core and athletic departments in making large-scale institution-wide decision.
- Conclusions for this study will begin to inform future policy and decision-making processes.

### **Incentives for participation**

This study does not provide any monetary incentives for participation. However, a copy of the results and/or policy brief on the data will be provided upon request.

### **Confidentiality and Presentation of Responses**

To ensure the appropriation and accurate representation of your opinions and experiences, responses to this survey will be kept electronically. Please note internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However, once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. Survey responses will be kept until this study is completed, at that time they will be destroyed. In addition, your responses will be confidential and presented with a description of your institutional position rather than your name.

### **Taking part is voluntary**

Your participation in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If during the survey completion process you decide that you can no longer participate, you may withdraw at any time and request the deletion of your responses. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still participate in this study. In addition, the principal investigator may withdraw you from this research if the circumstances arise which warrant such action.

Please note that any withdrawal from this study is done without penalty. You are not waiving legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this study. For additional information on your rights as a participant please contact the UGA IRB Board at 706.542.3199 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu)

### **If you have questions**

The main researcher conducting this study is Dennis A. Kramer II a doctoral candidate within the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Dennis Kramer at [dkramer@uga.edu](mailto:dkramer@uga.edu) or (714) 514-6442. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

### **Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:**

By completing this survey, you agree to voluntarily participate in this study and acknowledge that your responses may be used in the final report.

### **Athletic Conference Realignment Survey**

**Please select your role within the university or athletic department:**

1. University President, Chancellor, CEO
2. Senior Academic Administrator
3. Senior Student Affairs Administrator
4. Faculty Athletics Representative
5. Athletics Director or Similar
6. Senior Athletics Administrator
7. Athletic Conference Official
8. Board of Trustee or Similar
9. Other

**Please select the type of athletic conference realignment your institution recently completed:**

1. Automatic Qualifying Conference (AQ) to Automatic Qualifying Conference (AQ)
2. Non-Automatic Qualifying Conference (Non-AQ) to Automatic Qualifying Conference (AQ)
3. Non-Automatic Qualifying Conference (Non-AQ) to Non-Automatic Qualifying Conference (Non-AQ)
4. FCS to FBS
5. My Institution Did Not Experience Conference Realignment

**Please select your current institution:** (Only used for validation of conference realignment type -- information is omitted in export and institution is kept anonymous)

{List of Division I-A Institutions}

**Please rate the following factors and their level of importance within the athletic conference realignment decision making process:**

	Not Considered	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Essential
Access to additional conference revenues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Athletic competitive advantage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Athletic scheduling advantages	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alignment with similar athletic programs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alignment with similar academic institutions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Expansion of media “footprint”	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increasing athletic prestige	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Increasing academic prestige	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increasing institutional prestige	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Decreasing travel-based expenditures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creating / reconnecting athletic rivalries	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Actions of peer institutions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pressures or preferences of donors / boosters	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pressures or preferences of corporate sponsors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Athletic recruiting benefits	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reduction in institutional support of athletics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student Interest and Support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**In your opinion, what was the primary driver of the athletic conference realignment? Please provide additional context as to why this was the primary driver.**

**How rate the level of involvement of the following campus groups / offices in the recent athletic conference realignment:**

	No Involvement	Limited Involvement	Heavy Involvement	Critical Actors / Decision-Maker
Athletic Department	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
President's / Chief Executive Officer's Office	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Faculty Senate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
University Communication Department	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provost's / Chief Academic Officer's Office	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
University General Counsel or Legal Team	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Donors or Benefactors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Athletic Corporate Sponsors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Please rate the influence each group had on the conference realignment decision-making process:**

	Non-Influential	2	3	4	Extremely Influential
Athletic Department	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
President's / Chief Executive Officer's Office	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Faculty Senate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
University Communication Department	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provost's / Chief Academic Officer's Office	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
University General Counsel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Donors or Benefactors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alumni	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Athletic Corporate Sponsors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Describe the predominate factor considered when deciding to accept or reject an invitation to join a new athletic conference.**

**In deciding to accept or reject an invitation to join a new conferences, was there collaboration between academic and athletic representatives? If so, please describe who served as the primary decision and how that collaboration took place.**

**In your opinion, what are the primary drawbacks to the recent athletic conference realignment?**

## APPENDIX D

### Institutional Support Letter



January 8, 2014

Institutional Review Board  
Human Subjects Office  
629 Boyd GSRC  
Athens, GA 30602-7411

Dear IRB Members:

After reviewing the proposed study, "Identifying Institutional Determinants and the Role of Institutional Leaders in Athletic Conference Realignment: A Case Study Analysis", presented by Mr. Dennis A. Kramer II, a doctoral candidate within the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia, I have granted permission for the study to be conducted at FIU.

The purpose of this study is to expand the scholarly research on the factors impacting athletic decision-making and role of academic and athletic leaders in the decision-making process. The research will focus on the role of potential institutional determinants on athletic conference realignment decisions. The primary activity will be to collect data via semi-structured interviews with participants. Both academic and athletic leaders who were present during the athletic conference realignment decision-making process are eligible to participate.

Mr. Kramer will contact FIU athletic and academic leaders to recruit them by email, including an information letter and consent form. His plan is to have participants identified by the end of January 2014 and all interviews conducted by February 2014. Mr. Kramer's on-site research will be completed by May 2014.

Mr. Kramer plans to receive consent from all participants. He will keep confidential any data he collects and will store the data on a secure personal computer.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number listed below.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mark B. Rosenberg", is written over a horizontal line.

Mark B. Rosenberg

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Modesto A. Maidique Campus, Miami, Florida 33199 • (305) 348-2111 • Fax: (305) 348-3660

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*Office of the President*

January 10, 2014

Institutional Review Board  
Human Subjects Office  
629 Boyd GSRC  
Athens, GA 30602-7411

Dear IRB Members:

After reviewing the proposed study, "Identifying Institutional Determinants and the Role of Institutional Leaders in Athletic Conference Realignment: A Case Study Analysis", presented by Mr. Dennis A. Kramer II, a doctoral candidate within the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia, I have granted permission for the study to be conducted at Southern Methodist University.

The purpose of this study is to expand the scholarly research on the factors impacting athletic decision-making and role of academic and athletic leaders in the decision-making process. The research will focus on the role of potential institutional determinants on athletic conference realignment decisions. The primary activity will be to collect data via semi-structured interviews with participants. Both academic and athletic leaders who were present during the athletic conference realignment decision-making process are eligible to participate.

Mr. Kramer will contact specified Southern Methodist University athletic and academic leaders to recruit them by email, including an information letter and consent form. His plan is to have participants identified by the end of January 2014 and all interviews conducted by February 2014. Mr. Kramer's on-site research will be completed by May 2014. Mr. Kramer plans to receive consent from all participants.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at 214/768-3300.

Sincerely,

R. Gerald Turner  
President

Southern Methodist University PO Box 750100 Dallas TX 75275-0100  
214-768-3300 Fax 214-768-3844