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Institutions are changing their athletic conference affiliation as a way to advance their ambitions.

Institutional Ambitions and Athletic Conference Affiliation

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The athletic conference in which a university or college competes has meaning that extends beyond the playing field. Institutions generally desire to compete against others that are similar to them in profile, including their approach to athletics, as well as being in the same geographic region. For instance, the Ivy League comprises eight highly selective private research universities in the Northeast; the Big Ten includes ten state flagship institutions (and one large private research university) in the Midwest; and in Divisions II and III of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), conferences often include institutions of a similar type from within a given state. Given their similar missions and close proximity, institutions within conferences typically compete in areas outside of athletics, whether in recruiting students, hiring and retaining faculty, or attracting research funding. The commonalities between and among institutions in a conference create a peer group useful in benchmarking, one that may even heighten competition between and among members. In this chapter, I explore how the division and conference in which an institution competes has implications beyond athletics. I examine how athletic affiliation links with institutional aspirations,

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including how institutions change divisions and conferences to better position themselves.

Types of Participation and Institutional Aspirations

As a general rule, the level of resources an institution commits to intercollegiate athletics determines in which division it competes within the NCAA, a factor that often correlates with size, with the largest institutions clustered in Division I and smaller schools in Division III. There are no hard rules, however, with some major research universities such as Emory, Washington University, and Chicago competing in Division III and a handful of liberal arts colleges, such as Davidson, being members of Division I. Indeed, among the 262 undergraduate institutions classified by the Carnegie Foundation as research or doctoral universities, only 61 (23 percent) have athletic programs that compete outside of Division I. Essentially all larger public universities are in Division I, with flagships making up most of the six major conferences: the Atlantic Coast, Big East, Big Ten, Big Twelve, Pacific Ten, and Southeastern. Within Division I, these institutions and those in five other conferences compete in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBC), with the other conferences primarily involving institutions with less research activity, such as Ball State, Wyoming, and Louisiana-Lafayette—but, again, not exclusively—with another set of similar institutions in the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), such as James Madison, Montana, and New Hampshire. Division II in general consists of smaller comprehensive and undergraduate institutions, with Division III including mostly smaller colleges.

Recently, a number of institutions have sought to switch their NCAA division, with universities and colleges entering not only Division I but also Divisions II and III, from both the NCAA and the NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics). (The NAIA is a parallel organization to the NCAA, with almost 300 members in twenty-five conferences and with competition closer in character to Division II; the NCAA has approximately 330 members in Division I, 290 in Division II, and 430 in Division III.) Several institutions have sought to “move up,” becoming Division I in an attempt to realize the benefits associated with spectator sports—that rather small part of intercollegiate athletics, including football and men’s basketball at the largest institutions, which attracts considerable public attention. These institutions, of course, also recognize that there are risks in increasing their investment in athletics, including financial ones, but they also covet the benefits that can come with increased exposure. Orszag and Orszag (2005) found that increased spending and debt typically accompanies moving from Division II to Division I, and the additional revenue, through television contracts especially, does not make up the difference.

The increased exposure that accompanies a move up to Division I can be significant. For example, a school may be within the sixty-five-team field of the annual men’s basketball tournament. If new Division I members Presbyterian

College, Bryant University, or the New Jersey Institute of Technology play North Carolina or UCLA in the first round of the tournament, they will have earned the attention they sought. For institutions moving to Division I, there is also the publicity of being included on the ESPN “scroll” of game results in football and basketball, and associational benefits by being grouped with the leading institutions nationally, both in athletics and otherwise. Western Kentucky, in “going Division I,” is now in the same grouping as the institutions in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), including the University of Kentucky. In addition, moves in division are sometimes connected with broader institutional strategies, such as becoming a research university as recognized in Carnegie classifications. Measuring the returns on such investments is difficult, partly because so many are psychological and intended to generate prestige instead of revenue.

Other universities and colleges have deemphasized athletics, “moving down” to a division that requires fewer commitments. Birmingham Southern, for instance, moved down two divisions, from Division I to Division III, relieving itself of various financial burdens (athletic scholarships for instance), and better aligning athletics with its nature as a selective liberal arts college.

Conference Affiliation

An associated benefit for an institution like Birmingham Southern or Western Kentucky is the ability to move into a conference that is more closely aligned with its institution type—and even its ambitions. Indeed, a primary factor in how institutions align into conferences is to group with similar institutions. Another is geographic proximity, and the two factors typically operate in conjunction. In advancing the common institutional aspiration to enhance prestige, conference affiliation can have utility. The classic example of an athletic conference being associated with institutional prestige is the Ivy League. The Ivy League is simply an athletic conference established in the 1950s by eight institutions whose approaches to athletics, and other commitments, are similar (Orleans, 2007). For instance, Ivy League institutions do not grant scholarships or compete in the annual Football Championship Subdivision (FCS, formerly Division I-AA) playoffs. They also seek to have their student athletes be as representative of their student body as is generally possible. Membership in the Ivy League places an institution in the company of the most prestigious institutions nationally, with all eight universities ranked in the top fourteen of the 2007 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings (Princeton, Yale, and Harvard rank first, second, and third). The institutions also lead the country in faculty salaries (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007), research activity (National Science Foundation, 2007), and admissions selectivity (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2007), competing against each other not only in athletics but also in these and other areas. The general public views the term *Ivy League* as shorthand for institutional prestige.

Like the Ivy League, other conferences have formed to collect similar prestigious institutions. The University Athletic Association in Division III also includes elite private research universities such as Carnegie Mellon, Case Western Reserve, and Chicago. The UAA is unusual in that research universities are typically in Division I, and its members are not geographically proximate, stretching from Washington University in St. Louis in the West, Emory in the Southeast, and Brandeis, New York University, and Rochester in the Northeast. The New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC), also in Division III, comprises elite liberal arts colleges (with the exception of Tufts University), such as Williams and Amherst. Once again, these institutions are similar in their admissions profile. Like the Ivy League, the conference does not compete in the NCAA football championship and is often “more restrictive than those of the NCAA Division III with regard to season length, number of contests, and post-season competition” (NESCAC, 2007). The Patriot League, a Division I conference also in the Northeast, includes eight prestigious institutions, among them the two service academies at West Point and Annapolis, and the Division III Centennial Conference has members from Pennsylvania, such as Swarthmore, and Maryland, including Johns Hopkins.¹

The Big Ten includes several of the most prominent athletics programs nationally and similarly collects like institutions—the leading public research universities of the Midwest (plus private Northwestern)—with the conference adding to the prestigious brand of its member institutions. Like the Ivy League—and now the UAA, NESCAC, Patriot League, and Centennial Conference—being associated with the leading institutions of a type offers significant benefits. Being a Big Ten or Ivy League institution means something, especially when the conference collects universities that are at the top of the prestige hierarchy. But even membership in a less academically prestigious conference, such as the SEC, Big East, or Big Twelve, identifies an institution as a leader in athletics, as well as one of the significant institutions in its region.

Indeed, geographic proximity is the other driver of conference affiliation. Initially, difficulties in long-range transportation required institutions to compete with those nearby; and lower costs and less time associated with travel continue to be a rationale. Division I conferences are generally regional, and Division II and III conferences, as well as those in the NAIA, usually include institutions within the state or one of its neighboring states. Given the investment in athletics in Division I, particularly among the larger programs in the major conferences, competing against like institutions is more important than geographic proximity. Thus Iowa State and Texas A&M, both state flagships, compete against each other in the Big Twelve, as do Minnesota and Penn State in the Big Ten and Arkansas and Florida in the SEC. Each of the institutions also has a statewide presence, and state pride, satisfied by competing favorably with universities in other states, which has long been reason enough for investing in athletics. Indeed, essentially every

state flagship institution and larger comprehensive competes in Division I. Also, presence in a major Division I conference has significant exposure benefits; the most prominent conferences have the largest television contracts and game attendance, which also bring increased revenue possibilities. Over the past decade, seeking such advantage has motivated a realignment of conferences, as with Boston College, the University of Miami, and Virginia Tech leaving the Big East for the Atlantic Coast Conference, which is not only more financially beneficial but also includes more prestigious institutions. The realignment has spread existing conferences, as with the ACC now stretching from Boston to Miami (as opposed to from College Park, Maryland to Tallahassee, Florida) and the Big East conference going as far west as Marquette University in Milwaukee. Exposure and revenue have also caused smaller programs to group into conferences where geographic convenience is a secondary concern, as in Conference USA, which includes the University of Central Florida (Orlando), Marshall University (Huntington, West Virginia), and the University of Texas at El Paso.

Meanwhile, geography is often more important in forming several Division II and III conferences than is institution type. For instance, the Division II Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference (CACC) in the mid-Atlantic region consists of thirteen private institutions, including, by traditional Carnegie classification types, a doctoral-research university, a liberal arts college, seven master's colleges and universities, two baccalaureate colleges, a specialized business institution, and a specialized health professions institution. Similar Division II examples are the Northeast 10 and the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference (RMAC), each with a mix of public and private institutions of various missions and sizes. The Division III Skyline Conference in upstate New York offers another illustration of a group of institutions that have little more in common than proximity. NAIA conferences are similar in composition. What these institutions do share, in addition to being in the same region, is their approach to athletics. There is also a heightened potential for rivalries (in addition to advantages in reduced travel time and classes missed), as the athletic director at Chestnut Hill College noted when the institution joined the CACC: "Affiliation in this conference allows Chestnut Hill College the opportunity to develop intra-city rivalries with Philadelphia University, Holy Family University, and the University of the Sciences, along with the increased exposure that goes with it" (Stiles, 2007). Given their differences in type, these institutions may compete less for students and faculty (as in the Ivy League, for instance), but they do compete academically, at least some against some others. For example, the "auto peer group" function in IPEDS generates the other RMAC liberal arts colleges as peers.

There are also examples, as in the Division III Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SCIAC) and Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC), of institutions of different Carnegie type, all privately governed, banding together. Other conferences combine proximity

and type but similarly governed institutions, such as the Pennsylvania Athletic Conference (PAC) in Division III, which includes only private master's universities or colleges, as classified by Carnegie. The Division II Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference (PSAC) includes the fourteen institutions that make up the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE); the California Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) in Division II includes all California State system universities (and the University of California, San Diego); and the Division III Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC) and New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC) are entirely state system institutions. Finally, the Division III Presidents Athletic Conference embraces proximate institutions that are different in type but are all privately governed, and as third- and fourth-tier institutions in the *U.S. News* rankings competing for students and benchmark against one another in institutional research.

Switching Conferences and Institutional Strategy

Several institutions have switched conferences for reasons beyond athletics, including the intention of enhancing their prestige. In Division I, Pennsylvania State University joined the Big Ten in the early 1990s. The move was certainly significant in athletics, where Penn State was an independent in football and competed otherwise in the Atlantic Ten, a conference hosting smaller programs. On entering the Big Ten, Penn State became part of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation or CIC (which also includes the University of Chicago, an early Big Ten member). The CIC promotes collaboration across institutions, in areas such as study abroad, language instruction, and libraries, and has “affinity groups” of administrations with similar portfolios that meet regularly, as well as at twice-annual congresses of student leaders. There is also the new Big Ten Network, which has not only athletic content but also programming to highlight research activity and cultural events on the eleven conference campuses (Wolverton, 2006; Spanier, 2007). Apart from these opportunities, joining the Big Ten enhanced the prestige of Penn State, associating it in the most direct manner with the leading collection of public research universities nationally.

One of the six Bowl Championship Series (BCS) conferences in the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (the FBS, formerly Division I-A), the Big East added five institutions from Conference USA, after losing three prominent members to the Atlantic Coast Conference. The BCS programs are the wealthiest in intercollegiate athletics, and this alone gave the institutions a reason to join. But there were also nonathletic benefits. The president of the University of Louisville framed the move as being of strategic importance for athletics but also for the institution: “The University of Louisville is dedicated to earning national recognition for academic and research achievement, and joining the Big East conference is an opportunity to be affiliated with many of the nation’s most renowned institutions” (Ramsey, 2003). The University of South

Florida president also referenced strategic goals in speaking about USF's move into the Big East: "These are universities that will be solid university partners over the next decades, and I believe our affiliation with them will advance our brand as a national research university. Academically and athletically, it's strategic positioning" (Carney, 2003). She added that Big East conference members would now be South Florida's new set of peer institutions: "It was clear to me that if we were to join the Big East, we would be in the company of universities that represent who we are and who we aspire to be. . . . They are institutions that have values and commitments to excellence in academics as well as athletics" (Carney, 2003). In addition, existing conference members care about the reputation of institutions looking to join. The University of Cincinnati president noted its academic reputation was important to the Big East inviting the institution to join (Koch, 2003). In Division III, conferences also benefit from adding prestigious new members. When the Stevens Institute of Technology joined the Empire Eight Conference, it became the first research university in the group.

In joining the ACC, which has several leading public and private research universities as members, notably Georgia Tech, North Carolina, Virginia, and Duke, and thus significant affiliational benefits just associated with reputation, the University of Miami president also referenced the attractiveness of the conference planning an academic coalition such as the CIC. With Virginia Tech, the state governor became involved in encouraging the ACC to select the institution over Syracuse, recognizing the significance of joining such a prestigious group (Suggs, 2003). Also, several Big East institutions sued the ACC, arguing that they were damaged financially (and, by extension, in reputation) by the defections (Glenn and Gose, 2003).

Division II and III institutions also switched conferences for reasons beyond competition on the field or court. Gannon University and Mercyhurst College, both in Pennsylvania, have moved from the Division II Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (GLIAC) to the Division II Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference (PSAC), becoming its first two private members. The additions promise to boost the overall academic reputation of the conference, with both of the new members ranked in *U.S. News*, while only four of the current fourteen PSAC members are. Gannon and Mercyhurst are looking to lower travel costs, reduce missed classes, and restore local rivalries (Dudley, 2007; Mattis, 2007). In Division III, Juniata College, also in Pennsylvania, joined the new Landmark Conference, which includes more institutions similar to its liberal arts college profile and more highly ranked schools. As a practical matter, Juniata will join institutions with similar philosophies and standards and accordingly will amass more opportunities for administrative, curricular, and co-curricular partnerships (Cookson, 2006b), while it gains in both athletic and academic reputation (Cookson, 2006a). "Four of Juniata's future football rivals are ranked in the *U.S. News and World Report* Top 50 among either national universities (Johns Hopkins) or national liberal arts colleges (Franklin and

Marshall, Dickinson, Gettysburg),” noted its alumni magazine (Cookson, 2005, p. 45).

Concluding Thoughts

Institutions in the United States have a clear sense of their peers, benchmarking and competing against them. Neither activity makes much sense if institutions are not similarly situated, with measures comparing apples and oranges, and institutions with fewer advantages inevitably losing to other contenders. It makes sense for universities and colleges to also want to compete only with institutions in athletics that share their approach, characteristics, and location. When such conference affiliations add to the prestige of an institution, the impulse is only stronger. Brewer, Gates, and Goldman (2002) conclude that intercollegiate athletics has an influence on the prestige of an institution. Indeed, associating in a division or athletic conference with institutions that bring the most strategic advantage to a university or college is a critical consideration.

Note

1. Hopkins competes in Division I in lacrosse, an exception to the Centennial approach to athletics. In addition, private institutions such as Vanderbilt in the Southeastern Conferences and Northwestern in the Big Ten compete with a set of public institutions that are dissimilar in several respects, sharing more a common commitment to competing at the most prominent level in sports. There are also two Division I and two Division II conferences composed of historically black colleges and universities (HCBUs), which are similar in philosophy and approach as well as being relatively geographically proximate.

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