

An Examination of Modern College Conference Realignment

By Matt Shiffman

Introduction

Conference realignment has shaken the universe of college sports in recent years. In the past, conferences were based off institutional alignment, geographical location, and longstanding traditional rivalries. Those past priorities have been pushed aside in favor of maximizing brand value, and media rights contracts. Recent changes have sent shockwaves through college sports that have had ramifications on all ends of college sports. This examination of conference realignment will look at how we got here, the effects it has had today, and where we could be heading in the future.

Recent History

Modern college football conference realignment effectively began in 2011. It is important to understand that modern college conference realignment is exclusively happening because of media rights deals for college football and maximizing a brand's value. Quite simply, it is where the money for the majority of these institutions is made. From 2011 to 2014 we saw the forming of the power five conferences that lasted for about a decade. In 2011 the PAC-10 became the PAC-12, with Colorado joining from the Big 12, and Utah the Mountain West. Its in state counterpart BYU also left the Mountain West, becoming an FBS independent. Nebraska left the Big 12 like Colorado, instead joining the Big 10. The following year, Missouri and Texas A&M left the Big 12 for the SEC. The conference countered these losses by poaching TCU from the Mountain West and West Virginia from the Big East. In 2013 we saw the Big East dissolve for Football purposes. The conference is still relevant for basketball, by many considered a power conference. On the men's side, the conference had the National Champion in 2016 and 2018 with Villanova, as well as 2023 and 2024 with UConn. On the women's side, UConn returned to the

top in 2025, winning the National Championship for the first time since returning to the Big East. Speaking of that return, it was necessary because the school was one of many to join the American Athletic Conference (AAC) following the Big East's football death. Cincinnati, Louisville, Rutgers, South Florida, Temple, and the aforementioned UConn joined. Pitt and Syracuse bolted for the much more powerful ACC, and the Big East officially became a non-football conference, retaining the 'Catholic 7', DePaul, Georgetown, Marquette, Providence, St. John's, Seton Hall, and Villanova. The separation of these basketball schools and Syracuse in particular ended many classic Big East rivalries that northeast fans of the time had grown up on. UConn became independent in football in 2020 and returned to the Big East for all other sports, renewing some classic matchups. 2014 was the last year that saw major conference movement until 2024. Maryland left the ACC, separating from its historic basketball rivalry with Duke as well as geographical proximity to Virginia and others. They joined the Big 10 along with Rutgers, who left the AAC. Neither team fit geographically with the Midwest focused Big 10. For the next nine seasons, the power five conference remained the same (Henry, 2025).

The Big 10 had its 14-team conference of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, Rutgers, and Wisconsin.

The Big 12 had its 10-team conference of Baylor, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, Texas, TCU, Texas Tech and West Virginia.

The PAC-12 consisted of a correctly labeled 12 members: Arizona, Arizona State, Cal, Colorado, Oregon, Oregon State, Stanford, UCLA, USC, Utah, Washington and Washington State.

The SEC now had 14 teams, Alabama, Arkansas, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, LSU, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi State, Ole Miss, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas A&M, and Vanderbilt.

Lastly for the power conferences, the ACC was made up of 14 of its own teams, Boston College, Clemson, Duke, Florida State, Georgia Tech, Pitt, Louisville, Miami (FL), North Carolina, North Carolina State, Syracuse, Virginia, Virginia Tech, and Wake Forest (Henry, 2025).

Coincidentally, this version of the power conferences was finalized for the 2014 season, the same year the four team College Football Playoff began. Every team but one to make the four-team version of the CFP came from these five conferences. The lone exception was undefeated Cincinnati in 2021, out of the AAC, who lost in the National Semi-Final to Alabama. These five conferences would dominate the CFP and biggest bowl games for the next decade, living up to its power 5 name. While cracks were starting to show with some of the separations, these conferences mostly made sense geographically and did not compromise the student-athlete experience. They would last until the conclusion of the 2023 season, when a seismic shift rocked the college world (Henry, 2025).

It is ironic that Texas and Oklahoma, two schools that mostly fit in with the rest of the SEC, started a domino effect that ended with Stanford and Florida State in the same conference. The schools sought a bigger piece of the media deal pie, and the SEC was able to provide it. They left for the start of the 2024 season, coincidentally the same year the PAC-12 would need a new media deal. When the negotiations with FOX did not go well, USC and UCLA started looking around. They saw that Texas and Oklahoma gotten an upgrade in media deal money and

were looking for their own. On June 30th, 2022, the two Southern California powerhouse brands announced their move to the Big 10 for the start of the 2024-25 academic calendar year and beyond. Shortly after that, Oregon and Washington followed them to the Big 10. Next, Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado, and Utah made their intention of joining the Big 12 public. UCF, BYU, Houston, and Cincinnati also joined the Big 12 during this time. Lastly, Cal and Stanford, scrambling, joined the ACC out of desperation. Both schools accepted significantly reduced media deal payouts to make sure they did not get stuck on sinking ship with no life raft. SMU would also leave the AAC to join the ACC. Oregon State and Washington State were not as fortunate as the others. The two schools left in the suddenly destroyed PAC-12 with no new conference to join. Despite the PAC-12 losing ten of its 12 members, it wanted to continue as a conference, building around the two schools they had left. They grabbed five schools from the Mountain West, Boise State, Colorado State, Fresno State, San Diego State, and Utah State, essentially dividing the Mountain West into two conferences. This left Air Force, Hawaii, Fresno State, New Mexico, Nevada, San Jose State, and Wyoming in the Mountain West. Because of the PAC-12's desire to rebuild, the Mountain West was divided into two (Henry, 2025).

Literature Review

Conference realignment has always existed. Besides 2019, every year since 1990 has seen at least one team change conference. However, normally it was one or two minor changes, with a few big moves mixed in every now and then. Even then, when it would happen, there was still geographical logic behind it. For example, Miami and Virginia Tech leaving the Big East for the ACC. However, in recent years, we have seen geographic and intuitional alignment thrown to the side in favor of maximizing a brands value in exposure and media rights. Modern

realignment is generally happening because of potential revenue generated by TV and sponsors, as opposed to academic and regional harmony (Smith, 2013; Southall & Nagel, 2016). In 2023, we reached uncharted territory with realignment. A territory that feels so uncharted it is hard to imagine any scenario where previous conference values are restored. The cat is out of the preverbal bag. Institutions have prioritized maximizing their value in television contracts over keeping tradition going for generations (Smith, 2013). Smith wrote in 2013, but it still applies to current day happening. Gonzaga has become a national powerhouse in basketball under Head Coach Mark Few. The 4500-student undergrad, private Catholic school was not supposed to become a regular championship contender. But, with Few at the helm since 2000, they have become one. And because of it, with the PAC-12 looking to rebuild their conference in the wake of losing ten schools, Gonzaga was offered an invitation to join as a non-football member. Gonzaga officials prioritized the bump in exposure and money, leaving the West Coast Conference. Gonzaga has been a member for the last 47 years (WCC Sports), and the university has no real connection to any of the schools it will join in the new PAC-12, but that simply isn't a relevant data point in this equation. The TV networks have become the chess players, with schools serving as pieces on the board. Because TV networks can pick and choose who they prioritize based on television ratings and revenue generation, they have heavy influence on the shaping of conferences. (Southall, 2008) Recent events have only strengthened that argument. If FOX and the PAC-12 were able to come to a media rights agreement in 2021, it's worth wondering what conferences would look like in 2026. Remember, USC and UCLA only started shopping themselves once the PAC-12 was clearly failing to garner a media deal with FOX. Then, the Big 12 signed a deal with ESPN and FOX that put them ahead of the PAC-12. Finally,

some last-ditch efforts to save the ten teams remaining, but ultimately, the PAC-12 became the PAC-2 (McCollough, 2023).

Realignment motivations leave a certain group with the short end of the stick. For administrators and media rights companies, they have a shared goal of maximizing their financial value. As mentioned earlier, many things are thrown to the side in order to prioritize the bottom line. That includes the student-athlete experience. Research has shown that increased travel distance can cause missed class time, a spike in fatigue, and overall, a stronger physical and mental strain on athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The reality is it's just lower on the list of priorities when teams change conferences. In fact, if it was *the* priority, there would be no conference realignment at all. Brett Martens of SB Nation explained how media rights originally beginning to be distributed in 1984 led to modern conference realignment where television revenue is the biggest driver in all the movement. (Martens 2012).

Lastly, who is to blame for all this movement? At the end of the day, institution administrators and media right company representatives are doing their job. They are acting within the best interest of the brands they represent, at least in their eyes. So, who should hold them accountable if realignment is ultimately a net negative for the health of the sport? Some say conference realignment is a microcosm of the NCAA's shortcomings. Because the NCAA does not regulate realignment it leaves a small number of schools and representatives of those schools with all the power. Power that effects schools, coaches, and athletes that's best interest is simply not being considered when decisions are made regarding realignment (Washington and Patterson 2011).

Modern conference realignment is a new phenomenon. Before the last couple years there hadn't been many moves at all that compromised the school in a geographical way like present day. There isn't enough data yet to research how much these moves impacted recruiting, fan engagement, student-athlete quality of life, and other potential side effects. This current model could be temporary. The ACC and Big 12 media deals end in early 2030, and with the power so clearly in the SEC and Big 10, many expect those two conferences to try and poach more schools and potentially head towards two super-conferences (Taylor, 2026). Currently, the SEC and Big 10 will accrue about 60% of revenue, with the Big 12, ACC and group of 5 making up the other 40% (Taylor, 2026). That is 34 schools making up 60% of what 136 FBS schools generate. To take it one step further, Wall Street Journal's 2025 study of the most valuable college football programs had 18 of the top 20 schools coming from either the SEC or Big 10. Only Notre Dame (#6) and Colorado (#20) are not members of those two conferences (Crawford, 2026). The balanced conferences based on similarities in institutions are a thing of the past.

Stakeholders

The biggest stakeholder in conference re-alignment is the companies making the media rights deals. They are the ones driving conference re-alignment to begin with. In a theoretical world that does not exist, if all media rights deals were equal, we would never have conference re-alignment. If money was not a consideration, other factors that get trumped by the dollars would rise to the top. Geographical location, rivalries, conference size, and an overall emphasis on alignment of conferences that consist of schools that fit with each other. I think about what divisions look like in professional sports. Of course, those are smaller, but there is no fear that

the Yankees are going to leave the AL East to join the NL Central and abandon their rivalries and geographical fit with their division. However, we do not live in that world. Conferences are always going to be looking to make themselves as valuable as possible to potential TV networks. The Big 10 didn't jump at the opportunity to add four schools on the west coast because they thought USC, UCLA, Oregon, and Washington fit with the conference's current schools. Adding these schools helps the conference's value as a media rights partner. The conference now taps into the Los Angeles market, while grabbing two of the most iconic brands in collegiate sports (Adelson, Bonaguara, & Rittenberg). While Oregon and Washington don't quite have that brand or market, they are both strong football programs with Oregon specifically winning the Big 10 in its first year in the conference. Companies like ESPN, FOX, CBS, and others as the biggest stakeholders because they are the ones driving this realignment. The conferences and Ads make decisions that try to generate the best media deal for their conference. For the start of 2024, the SEC, adding Texas and Oklahoma, transitioned to ESPN full time after their 27-year run on CBS (Sykes II, 2024). As for the Big 10, they were able to split their deal with FOX, CBS, and NBC. FOX retained priority for the best Big 10 game of the week, but CBS, in the new mega conference of 18 teams, saw value in the #2 choice each week in the conference.

Players and coaches are impacted tremendously by the teams they play every year, and the majority of their schedule comes from their conference opponents. It's particularly interesting because the coaches and players have no say on their conference. That decision is made by people way above them, and yet they feel the effects of the changing conferences. Star Stanford Women's Basketball player Cameron Brink is a good example. Brink was eligible for the WNBA draft after the 2023-24 season but was considering a return to school. However, in part due to the

travel that being an ACC member would require, given that Stanford is located across the country of all ACC schools but Cal, she turned pro (Awful Announcing, 2024). Her final season at Stanford was Stanford's last in the PAC-12 before the realignment. Of course, Brink, as well as the best players in basketball and football, are in a position where they can choose college or the pros. For student athletes playing non-revenue generating sports, the travel can weigh even more. Often traveling commercially, asking players to consistently travel across the country effects recruiting and retention of players. In every NCAA and conference survey and through numerous research studies, athletes have made their concerns and needs known. Excessive athletics time demands are interfering with sleep, prohibiting recovery from injury and strenuous exercise sessions, increasing the dangers of concussion, inducing stress that affects mental health, and interfering with academic responsibilities (Drake Group 2023). This effects all conference members too. Look at Duke's 2025-26 Men's Basketball schedule. With Cal and Stanford road games on the schedule, the ACC has Duke playing both in one week, Cal on 1/14 and Stanford on 1/17. That means Duke's basketball players will miss class for three straight days as they stay in California for the week. There are many examples of how conference realignment is schools and conferences to prioritizing TV dollars over student athlete health and well-being. The reality is, the people in power aren't worried about the travel day that the Oregon soccer players will have to deal with when Rutgers in on the conference schedule. They are worried about maximizing the dollar value and the student-athletes have to wear the effect that those decisions have.

Fans are also strongly affected by conference realignment. Rivalries separate college sports from professional in many ways. That true hatred that is common in college rivalries is

hard to find in pro sports. The recent 2024 conference realignment separated a litany of classic games from happening annually. Just to name a few, Oregon vs. Oregon State, Washington vs. Washington State, Oklahoma vs Oklahoma State are classic games that have lost so much of their meaning. It is now on teams to schedule these out of conference games every year to keep the tradition going, and even if they can fit them into the schedule, the games not counting towards conference play takes away from the glimmer of these matchups. In the past, fans would often times have pride for their conference. Now, that has been lost with modern conferences feeling more like transactional business ventures and less like an identity, a sports conference that represented not just your institution, but the area of said school (Walker, 2024).

Potential Solutions

Chip Kelly has been coaching college football since 1990, outside of a four-year run in the NFL. Kelly's worked his way up to Oregon's HC position and lost in the National Championship before that NFL hiatus. He would return to coach UCLA and then go on to be the offensive coordinator for the 2024 National Champion Ohio State Buckeyes. Kelly proposes that college football needs to separate itself from all other college sports. "The reality is, conference realignment has happened because of the money that football generates. If football separates itself from conferences, it would allow schools to go back to conferences that make sense geographically. I'd be for we're all in the same division" (Sandoval 2023) Kelly said during his time as UCLA head coach. Including Notre Dame, the power conferences currently have 68 teams. Kelly would go on to say "There should be one conference in all of college football, then just break it up like they do the professional level based on geography that makes the most sense.

There's your travel question, there's all those other questions, but no one asks me” (Sandoval, 2023). Kelly’s ideas clearly stem from the brief but real experience he has as an NFL coach. The Philadelphia Eagles coach for three years, and the San Francisco 49ers coach for one, Kelly referenced the power conference teams being divided into divisions that make sense geographically (like how college football was once upon a time). Kelly’s vision would also address the group of 5 situation that many are raising questions about after the 2026 College Football Playoff. Not only would diluting these mega 16+ team conferences prevent a situation where a 7-5 team ends up in a conference title game, like Duke did in the ACC, this model would allow the power conferences and group of 5 schools to have separate playoff brackets.

Conclusion

In conclusion, being a part of a conference simply means something different in our current day and age. In the past, it usually meant playing all your fellow conference members in football, and multiple times in sports that have more than 12 games on the schedule. At the very least, schools in football would play everyone from their division within the conference. Now, Texas and Oklahoma share a conference, are bitter rivals, and played 0 common opponents in football in 2025. They played each other, and then seven different teams in the SEC. Do college sports in 2026 even have conferences? If so, the word conference means something different than it did in 2016. And it seems like its going to mean something completely different in 2036.

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