

# The Impact of Competitive Markets on Recruiting: Lessons from Collegiate Athletics

Conference realignment in NCAA college athletics impacted traditional rivalries and affiliations as it took shape from 2010 to 2013. As schools traded conferences, their college football programs were left to compete against new foes, and in new markets for high school athletes. The impact of brand recognition, prestige, and new conference affiliation on recruiting are examined herein. The findings of the market competitive externalities are important for every labour market in which business opt to compete.

**Keywords:** recruiting, conference realignment, college football.

Nacionalinė koledžių atletų asociacija (NCCA) konferencijų pertvarkymas turėjo įtakos įprastiems derbiams ir jų asociacijoms nuo 2010 iki 2013 m. Kai mokyklos pakeitė konferencijas, jų koledžių futbolo programos atletai buvo palikti rungtyniauti prieš naujus varžovus naujose rinkose. Šiame darbe tiriama įtaka prekės ženklo atpažinimui ir prestižui bei naujos konferencijos ryšys su naujų žaidėjų pritraukimu. Rezultatai apie rinkos konkurencingumo išorės veiksnius yra svarbūs kiekvienai darbo rinkai, kurioje verslas nusprendžia konkuruoti.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** žaidėjų pritraukimas, konferencijų pertvarkymas, koledžo futbolas.

## Introduction

Conference realignment shook the very foundation of college athletics in the period between 2010 and 2013. Traditional rivalries deteriorated as schools went in search of greater economic advantages elsewhere, in hopes of stabilizing their operations for years to come.

Given this mobility, this paper seeks to understand the impact that conference realignment had on a school's ability to recruit star athletes. Given new conference ties, new rivalries, greater television exposure, and a new geographical footprint from which to recruit, it is important assess the impact of these new alignments. Lessons learned are then advanced and generalized for managers in other areas.

**The research objective** of this paper is to examine the differential in recruiting outcomes that realignment had on a school's ability to attract top quality athletes. It will accomplish this by considering the differences between recruiting classes for schools prior to and after their move to new conferences. The lessons here are important for athletic agents and for business managers who seek opportunities to continuously attract and retain top-level talent.

**The tasks** include using the Rivals.com recruiting database for football recruits specifically for a school's recruiting class for the years between 2007 and 2016. This study will utilize the athlete's star rating, his player rating, and will introduce the total player rating which is the product of their star rating times their player rating.

**The research methods** include an independent samples t-test in order to compare the recruiting classes prior to and after their change in conference.

**The research results** indicate that conference realignment impacted schools differently; however, some themes emerged in the results. Schools that went from a conference considered a Group of Five conference saw a more robust increase in their recruiting after they joined one of the more prestigious Power Five conferences. Further, schools that had experienced success in their previous conferences found that they more easily assimilated to, and had more success in, their recruiting cycles. Finally, there is a strong connection between brand-quality perception, conference affiliation, and geography. These implications are important to the general business environment as well.

## Literature review

R. Thorburn (2010), I. Maisel (2011), Uben (2011), and B. McMurphy (2013) note that the period between 2010 and 2013 brought many changes to the landscape of college athletics, as traditional rivalries and long-standing relationships were severed in a round of conference realignment. In this time period, the Pacific 12 Conference welcomed the University of Utah and the University of Colorado, the Big Ten Conference added the University of Nebraska, Rutgers University, and the University of Maryland. The Big 12 Conference replaced their departures with Texas Christian University (TCU) and the University of West Virginia, the Southeastern Conference expanded to include

Missouri and Texas A&M University. Finally, the Atlantic Coast Conference increased its membership with Syracuse University, the University of Louisville, and the University of Pittsburgh.

Many of these departures ran contrary to what K. Sweitzer (2009) identified as the two ways in which conferences were historically structured: through similar academic and demographic configurations or through a geographic proximity. There were many stated reasons for this wave of realignment, however, D. Kramer (2016) reports that at the heart of this move was, "The interplay between additional athletics-based revenue with increasing institutional visibility and prestige".

One way to boost visibility and prestige is to hire the best coaches that can then attract and develop the best talent. Recruiting, however, remains at the forefront for building a successful college football program (Caro, 2012). The academic literature has benefited from a review of the relationship between recruiting and success (Caro, 2012). This success then has been linked to everything from an increase in student applications to the university (Pope and Pope, 2009; 2014) to increased donor giving (Brooker, Klastorin, 1981; Holmes, Meditz, Sommers, 2007). While the explosion of revenue that followed conference realignment (Hoffer, Pincin, 2015), the impact on rivalry (Harvard, Wann, Ryan, 2013), game day attendance (Groza, 2010), and competitive balance in conferences (Perline, Stoldt, 2007) have all been examined, the aim here is to take a more critical view on the impact of conference realignment on recruiting outcomes. The goal is to determine the differential impact that conference realignment

had on those schools that opted to change conference affiliation, and examine the role of prestige and institutional visibility on a recruit's decision to attend a particular school.

As with any form of multipoint competition, organizations must differentiate themselves in order to drive the value proposition in the eye of the consumer. This is no different in collegiate athletics. As revenues have risen, schools have more avenues by which to bolster their recruiting advantages. This has manifested itself differently across the football landscape. Clemson University invested \$55 million on a new football complex that includes laser tag, a bowling alley, a barber shop, and a full arcade (Connolly, 2016). Texas A&M, one of the schools that switched conference allegiance through the realignment process, invested \$20.8 million on upgrades to their player facility, which included hand-crafted leather chairs made in Spain (Gaines, 2014). As W. Hobson and S. Rich (2015) report, the lavish spending on facilities is not limited to one conference or one part of the country as forty-eight schools in the wealthiest conferences accounted for \$772 million in combined spending on athletic facilities and upgrades.

This spending is in an effort to attract, develop, and retain, the best athletes at the high school level. It is intended to serve as a differentiator in a crowded market space, where your rivals have made, or are planning, investments to bolstering their brand and image. This spending is largely limited to the Power Five schools, where conference affiliation exerts immense pressure to imitate the moves of your rival in order to remain competitive. Still, schools seek this form of competition,

using conference membership to drive brand recognition, brand value, and institutional visibility. The impact of these affiliations is explored here.

## Methodology

The research methodology begins by identifying the schools that shifted conference affiliation to one of the Power Five FBS schools between 2010 and 2013. This paring of the data results in the identification of twelve universities, their departure and arrival conference, and the year(s) of their realignment. Next, recruiting information was gathered from the Rivals.com database for football recruits. Recruiting class information, including: player name, position, location, height, weight, his star classification, and player rating for 2007 to 2016 were downloaded from Rivals. Player name, position, location, height, and weight were removed, as they did not factor into the study. Most recruited athletes earn a star rating based on their athleticism and performance at the high school level. The scale ranges from 1 to 5, where a five-star prospect is considered more talented than a one-star athlete. While admittedly an arbitrary value that can differ across the different recruiting services, it is one of the more widely accepted rating systems for college recruits. Player ratings are assigned by the scouting system on a scale from 5.2 to 6.1. This rating system is designed to further differentiate the level of athleticism and is the basis for the total team points earned in a recruiting cycle. Again, the higher the score, the greater the perceived level of athleticism at the high school level.

A new variable, “total player rating” was created by multiplying the athlete’s star rating and his player rating. This was done in order to capture the subtle differences that can arise as a result of the star rating and the player rating. In essence, not all four-star prospects are the same, as they can earn a player rating between 5.8 and 6.0; thus, the variable was created to quantify these differences. The year of conference realignment was noted for each university, and a dichotomous variable of 0/1 was created for classes before (0) and after (1) the conference affiliation change. The final sample consisted of 2,604 cases across twelve universities, ten years, and two distinct time periods. Independent sample t-tests were conducted to explore the statistical significance of any differences in means for a school’s

recruiting class based on average star ratings, player rating, and total player rating for the periods before and after conference realignment.

## Results

Examination of the aggregate sample (Table 1) indicates that conference realignment resulted in a statistically significant increase in the average star rating (2.86 to 2.92) and the total player rating (15.97 to 16.40); however, the modest increase in player rating (5.46 to 5.49) across the entire sample was not significant.

Texas A&M (Table 2) and Missouri (Table 2), who both left the Big Twelve for the Southeastern Conference experienced gains in each of the three categories

**Table 1. Recruiting Outcomes pre- and post- Realignment for all Schools in the Sample for 2007–2014**

		N	$\bar{X}$
Star Rating	Pre	1445	2.86*
	Post	1159	2.92*
Player Rating	Pre	1445	5.46
	Post	1159	5.49
Total Player Rating	Pre	1445	15.97*
	Post	1159	16.40*
*Mean difference statistically significant at $\alpha=0.05$ .			

**Table 2. Texas A&M University and University of Missouri Recruiting Outcomes pre- and post- Realignment for 2007–2014**

		TAMU N	TAMU $\bar{X}$	Missouri N	Missouri $\bar{X}$
Star Rating	Pre	115	3.10*	116	2.97
	Post	118	3.46*	115	2.98
Player Rating	Pre	115	5.58	116	5.55
	Post	118	5.70	115	5.58
Total Player Rating	Pre	115	17.57*	116	16.74
	Post	118	19.96*	115	16.71
*Mean difference statistically significant at $\alpha=0.05$ .					

**Table 3. University of Nebraska, Rutgers University and University of Maryland Recruiting Outcomes pre- and post- Realignment for 2007–2014**

		Nebraska N	Nebraska $\bar{X}$	Rutgers N	Rutgers $\bar{X}$	Maryland N	Maryland $\bar{X}$
Star Rating	Pre-	97	3.15	133	2.90	158	2.96
	Post-	129	3.16	69	2.52	58	2.86
Player Rating	Pre-	97	5.58	133	5.52	158	5.52
	Post-	129	5.60	69	5.30	58	5.47
Total Player Rating	Pre-	97	17.89	133	16.25	158	16.54
	Post-	129	17.90	69	13.84	58	16.04

\*Mean difference statistically significant at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

**Table 4. University of Colorado and University of Utah Recruiting Outcomes pre- and post- Realignment for 2007–2014**

		Colorado N	Colorado $\bar{X}$	Utah N	Utah $\bar{X}$
Star Rating	Pre-	92	2.83	90	2.68
	Post-	131	2.60	145	2.80
Player Rating	Pre-	92	5.43	90	5.38
	Post-	131	5.25	145	5.38
Total Player Rating	Pre-	92	15.83	90	14.84
	Post-	131	14.38	145	15.65

\*Mean difference statistically significant at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

ries; however only the star rating and total player rating for Texas A&M proved to be statistically significant.

The universities that realigned with the Big Ten had different results. Nebraska (Table 3) saw a very slight uptick in each of the three ratings; however, Rutgers (Table 3) and Maryland (Table 3), who left the Big East and the Atlantic Coast conferences respectively, saw a statistically insignificant decrease in each of the three variables.

Colorado (Table 4) and Utah (Table 4) also exhibited recruiting outcomes on different spectrums despite both joining the Pac-12. Colorado's three recruiting measures dropped dramatically, but not statistically significantly after their move to the Pac-12. Utah, on the other hand, saw

modest gains in average player stars, and a statistically significant increase in total player ratings.

The Big Twelve's two additions, West Virginia and Texas Christian similarly experienced different recruiting outcomes after realignment. West Virginia (Table 5) saw a slight rise in their player ratings, a slight, but statistically significant drop in their total player ratings, while their average star rating remained the same. Texas Christian (Table 5) saw increases in each of the three recruiting outcomes.

Pittsburgh (Table 6), Syracuse (Table 6), and Louisville (Table 6) each left the Big East for the Atlantic Coast Conference. The data indicates that Louisville benefited most from the move as each of

**Table 5. University of West Virginia and Texas Christian University Recruiting Outcomes pre- and post- Realignment for 2007–2014**

		West Virginia N	West Virginia $\bar{X}$	TCU N	TCU $\bar{X}$
Star Rating	Pre-	124	2.87 <sup>*</sup>	106	2.81
	Post-	126	2.87 <sup>*</sup>	116	2.91
Player Rating	Pre-	124	5.41	106	5.46
	Post-	126	5.48	116	5.55
Total Player Rating	Pre-	124	16.04 <sup>*</sup>	106	15.60
	Post-	126	16.03 <sup>*</sup>	116	16.37

\*Mean difference statistically significant at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

**Table 6. University of Louisville, Syracuse University, and University of Pittsburgh Recruiting Outcomes pre- and post- Realignment for 2007–2014**

		Louisville N	Louisville $\bar{X}$	Syracuse N	Syracuse $\bar{X}$	Pitt N	Pitt $\bar{X}$
Star Rating	Pre-	143	2.64 <sup>*</sup>	147	2.46	124	3.02
	Post-	77	2.84 <sup>*</sup>	92	2.58	89	2.93
Player Rating	Pre-	143	5.18 <sup>*</sup>	147	5.35	124	5.58
	Post-	77	5.49 <sup>*</sup>	92	5.35	89	5.56
Total Player Rating	Pre-	143	14.71 <sup>*</sup>	147	13.41	124	16.94
	Post-	77	15.87 <sup>*</sup>	92	14.14	89	16.40

\*Mean difference statistically significant at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

the three recruiting measures (statistically) significantly improved after realignment. Pittsburgh saw decreases in each of the variables, but none of the declines were statistically significant. Syracuse demonstrated gains in average star and total player ratings, while the player rating mean remained the same.

Each of the schools in the sample exhibited an increase in the total points score as calculated by Rivals following realignment; however, only the difference in mean total points for Louisville was statistically significant.

## Discussion

The era of conference realignment was one that had a significant impact on the

landscape of college sports. Traditional rivals were separated, often with animus between universities, as athletic agents sought affiliations that provided economic advantages and, perhaps, a more traditional fit with respect to peer institutions. The financial windfall from these moves has been documented extensively in the literature; however, the aim here was to understand the impact of realignment on recruiting, as this is the foundation for competitiveness and success.

The externalities that impact successful recruiting can be vast. Perceived quality of coaching, athletic facilities, academic support, location, and history are a few, but not exhaustive determinants of a successful recruiting cycle. Successful recruiting can significantly impact the likelihood of winning, and winning

can generate even more opportunities for revenue and non-monetary benefits to the university. As such, athletic agents understand the seriousness of the process, and have made significant investments in securing the best talent available. The impact of the value of conference affiliation and the proverbial “strength” of the conference brand on recruiting outcomes is at focus here.

That Texas A&M and Missouri experienced increases in the three recruiting measures is, perhaps, expected. The Southeastern Conference is regarded as one of the more difficult conferences in the sport, and a jump in their rankings would be necessitated in order to remain competitive in their new conference. However, these schools came from the highly competitive, and, arguably, equally visible Big Twelve. Thus, the magnitude of those differences is, perhaps, an indication of an understanding of, and an investment in, recruiting as an aim to maintain a level of relevance in their new conference.

Rutgers and Maryland sit at almost the opposite end of the spectrum from the two cases above. While the decline in the recruiting outcomes for Maryland are not as stark as those for Rutgers, both experienced declines after joining the Big Ten. This does not necessarily point to a lack of urgency on the part of the athletic agent once the schools had assimilated into their new environment. Maryland remained near their historical recruiting averages once they joined the Big Ten. The same, however, is not true for Rutgers. The decline in the recruiting success for Rutgers may be the result of a few negatively synergistic events. On the one hand, the football program did lose their coach

over the span of this study. Further, and perhaps equally exhausting, the program went from winning conference championships in their more regional Big East conference to being a mediocre team in an established and more expansive conference. Here, there appears to be a disconnect between the conference brand and image and the perceived brand and image of the university, given its history and youth in the conference. These factors may have combined to severely undermine the economic advantages that were gained from the move to the Big Ten.

The Big Twelve welcomed TCU and West Virginia from the Mountain West and the Big East respectively. West Virginia, like Rutgers, had historical success in the Big East, competing for conference championships on a consistent basis. Unlike Rutgers, however, it appears as though the West Virginia brand name carried greater weight in the new conference, despite the geographical disadvantage. While the star rating and total player ratings have remained almost identical to their pre-conference shift, the spread of the quality of players have narrowed. TCU, on the other hand, is the first of the schools in the sample that shifted from a Group of Five school to a Power Five conference. TCU had a geographical advantage and a new-found level of success, which helped to make it an attractive addition to the conference. Still, playing in the Big Twelve meant a more rigorous schedule and the need to build quality depth in order to remain competitive. To that end, it appears that TCU has benefited from realignment in using their affiliation to a stronger cohort to attract better recruits.

Much like TCU, Utah has also benefited from moving out from a Group of Five conference, and their recruiting measures are an indication that their move to the Pac-12 has allowed them to attract a higher quality athlete. Like TCU, Utah experienced success as a Group of Five school that allowed them to enter the conference with a greater level of recognition, and they were able to leverage this to maintain a consistent level of recruiting. Colorado, on the other hand, has suffered in recruiting since leaving the Big Twelve. Each of the three recruiting measures have fallen since joining the Pac-12, but it is also important to note that Colorado had issues in attracting a quality head coach during this period. Still, they experienced a precipitous drop in recruiting success, one of the starker declines in the sample included in this study.

While Syracuse and Pittsburgh have been able to maintain, and in some instances outperform, their previous levels of recruiting since joining the Atlantic Coast Conference, Louisville exploded onto the ACC scene. Louisville reported three statistically significant gains in recruiting once they joined their new conference. Name recognition, coaching, and a passionate fan base have attributed to their gains in building a roster; however, it is important to consider conference affiliation here as well. Players that commit to play at Louisville now are keenly aware that they will have greater exposure, will play against a higher level of competition, and will have a real opportunity to play for championships than they would have had the school not made the move to a Power Five school.

## Implications

The implications of these findings have different, but important ramifications for university athletic agents. They can also be generalized to a broader management and strategy context.

First for both athletic directors and business leaders is the studying and understanding that the operating environment is critical, and making smart, strategic decisions about market entry and positioning will have long term effects on human performance and success. The results here indicate that many of the programs in the sample made calculated, strategic decisions when it came to the positioning of their athletic program. Most schools experienced robust recruiting success, especially, as was the case with Utah and TCU, when moving from a conference that did not have the same level of competition as their landing conference. The opposite can also be true and is a cautionary tale for decision-makers. The impact that realignment had on Colorado and Rutgers appear to represent programs that are lost in their new conferences, pitted against non-traditional rivals that have decades-old advantages of assimilation and history in the sport. It is important to keep in mind that one of the underlying motives for realignment was exposure and revenue. While the move for these two particular programs may bring the anticipated economic advantages, it may also severely impact brand and perceived quality of your product, given its future success against their newest rivals.

Equally important, individual brand recognition, and how you are perceived



relative to your competitive cohort are vitally important. TCU, Utah, and Louisville came to their new conferences as schools with winning records and experience playing on the larger stages in college football. This helped to promote brand awareness and drove a perception of quality with recruits. The moves to higher profile conferences synergized their brand and allowed them to remain viable once they moved to the more competitive conference. They were then able to leverage their new conference affiliations to attract better athletes. At the opposite end of the paradigm is Rutgers, and to some extent Colorado, who made moves to conferences without the level of sustained success, and it impacted a recruit's desire to attend the school. A change in competition and the areas in which you compete have a marked impact on the forces that drive your viability. These include a geographical footprint, awareness of brand, perception of quality of a brand, and the desire to affiliate with an unknown commodity. Therefore, it is important that decision makers appreciate an organization's position relevant to the competitive and geographical market and make decisions with an understanding of the impact it can have on your brand recognition and perception. Success cannot always be translated from one area to the next, and a competitive advantage may be specific to your existing geography and market.

Markets and competition absolutely matter, and where you opt to compete will have regional externalities that must be accounted for. Geography has impacted some of the schools in the study. Tradi-

tional rivalries helped some schools recruit states that it bordered. For example, Nebraska and Colorado could recruit a high school athlete from Texas by selling them on the idea that despite the distance from home, their families would still be able to watch him play once or twice a year when they played in the state. In these cases, losing access to fertile recruiting territory, like Nebraska and Colorado have lost access to the state of Texas, can have a severe impact on the quality of your recruiting classes. This is true for a more general business approach as well. Having an understanding of the labour market, and the availability of, and access to, skilled, qualified labour should be determinants of any strategic move an organization makes. Understanding how those relationships are tied to business outcomes is also imperative, as a change in region can quickly cause those inherent advantages to disappear.

Here the implications of changing conference affiliation have been explored, and the impacts it can have on recruiting success have been addressed. These implications are generalizable to managerial decisions in any organization and are important considerations when key decision makers deliberate market entry, expansion, or relocation of their current operations. Future research should focus on the direct impacts of realignment on the geographical footprint of these particular schools. Further avenues of research should explore the economic impact of these realignments, not on the school, but on the surrounding areas and on the value of the total brand.

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## KONKURENCINGOS RINKOS ĮTAKA ŽAIDĖJAMS PRITRAUKTI: KOLEGIALIŲ ATLETŲ PATIRTIS

### S a n t r a u k a

2010–2013 m. laikotarpiu įvykęs konferencijų pertvarkymas sukėlė šoką koledžų futbolo ištakoms. Tradiciniai varžovų derbiai buvo sunaikinti, kai mokyklos nusprendė ieškoti geresnės ekonomikos kitur, tikėdamos stabilizuoti savo veiklą ateityje. Esant šiam mobilumui, šiame moksliniame straipsnyje siekiama įvertinti konferencijų pertvarkymo įtaką galimybei pritraukti naujus aukšto meistriškumo atletus. Esant naujoms konferencijoms, naujiems derbiams, populiareesnėms transliacijoms ir naujoms geografinėms vietovėms, iš kurių galima pritraukti atletus, svarbu įvertinti visų šių aspektų įtaką. Pamokos išmoktos, patobulintos bei subendrintos kitų sričių vadybininkams.

R. Thorburn (2010), I. Maisel (2011), Ubben (2011) ir B. McMurphy (2013) pažymi, kad laikotarpiu nuo 2010 iki 2013 m. įvyko daug pokyčių koledžų atletų plotmėje, kai tradiciniai derbiai ir ilgai palaikmi santykiai buvo nutraukti konferencijų pertvarkymo metu. Šiuo laikotarpiu Ramioji 12 konferencija priėmė Jutos ir Kolorado universitetus, Didžiojo Dešimtuko konferencija pridėjo Nebraskos, Rutgerso ir Merilando universitetus. Didžioji 12 konferencija pakeitė išvykusias aukštąsias mokyklas į Teksaso Krikščionių, Vakarų Virdžinijos universitetus, Pietryčių konferencija išsiplėtė ir prijungė: Misūrio ir Teksaso A&M universitetus. Galiausiai Atlanto Pakrantės konferencija padidino

savo narių skaičių su Sirakūzų Luisvilio ir Pitsburgo universitetais. Vis dėlto, norint sukurti sėkmingą koledžo futbolo programą, svarbiausiu veiksmu išlieka žaidėjų pritraukimas (Caro, 2012). Išoriniai veiksniai, turintys įtakos sėkmingam žaidėjų pritraukimui, gali būti įvairūs: treniravimo kokybė, sporto bazės, akademinė pagalba, vieta ir istorija. Visgi tai nėra svarbiausi veiksniai, kurie nusako sėkmingo žaidėjo pritraukimo ciklą.

Šių atradimų pasekmės yra skirtingos, bet svarbios universitetų atletų agentams. Taip pat jie gali būti pritaikomi plačiajame vadybos ir strategijos kontekste. Pirmiausia abiem sporto direktoriams ir verslo lyderiams reikia suprasti, kad aplinka, kurioje dirbama, yra kritinė. Atlikti protingi ir strateginiai sprendimai įeinant į naują, turi ilgalaikius poveikius sėkmingai žmogaus veiklai. Lygiai taip svarbu individualaus prekės ženklo atpažinimas ir kaip jūs esate suvokiamas, palyginus su jūsų konkurencine kohorta – gyvybiškai svarbu. Taip pat reikia atkreipti dėmesį į regioninius veiksmus pasirinktoje rinkoje. Turinti darbo rinkos įvertinimą, jos prieinamumą ir prieigą, kvalifikuota darbo jėga turėtų būti pagrindinis veiksnys atliekant organizacijos strateginį veiksmą. Suprasti, kaip šie santykiai yra susieti su verslo rezultatais, taip pat būtina, nes regiono pasikeitimas gali greitai suteikti tuos pranašumus, kurie išnyksta.