Athletic Conference Switching and Universities’ Academic Reputations

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Management/leadership  Friday, May 30, 2014  11:10 AM  20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Conference Center C)

Abstract 2014-129

We propose to investigate the phenomenon of athletic conference switching from a new angle; as a way for the moving university to acquire and retain an increased academic reputation. We argue that not only do the benefits of conferences flow between members (e.g., shared revenues, conference branding) but the individual schools also benefit from external perceptions of their new conference members’ academic reputation. We believe that membership in a conference allows universities to expand their resource access to sources external to the membership itself – specifically in building reputational capital with outside constituencies because of that membership. Indeed, when someone mentions the Ivy League, they are often referring to an excellent academic reputation and not the athletic conference that originated the group title. This study hopes to understand the reputational benefits gained by a university upon switching to a new conference with better overall academic reputation. We conceive this conference reputation as an aggregate reputation of incumbent members, and introduce academic reputation as a currency that is leveraged within a conference that allows them to both attract outside universities to join them and retain incumbents.

Common perception is that universities that join these conferences primarily for football-centric purposes (Abbott, 2012; Rishe, 2012). This is for good reason: college football comprises roughly 68% of the total revenue for BCS schools’ athletic budgets (NCAA Publication, 2012). BCS universities compete for the opportunity to split a combined purse in excess of $174 million with the Automatic Qualifying (AQ) conferences sharing the greatest portion of the revenue, $145 million or 83.4% (Sporting News, 2011). The financial incentives continue to grow – with the introduction of the playoff system in 2014, revenues are expected to grow as high as $500 million with only $86 million (or 17.2%) expecting to be allocated to non-AQ conferences (Sporting News, 2013). The more athletically prestigious BCS conferences have higher resource foundations, such as facilities, state funded athletic budgets, and television revenues from conference-wide contracts. These are direct benefits.

However, the majority of university presidents have backgrounds as academics (i.e., possessing doctorates and publishing records in peer-reviewed journals in their respective fields), who place a high value on academic prestige. Most have become presidents “having lived almost exclusively in academic organizations” as such “tend to be strongly committed to conventional academic values” (Cohen & March, 1986: 24-25). Many would argue that a president’s primary responsibility is to ensure the quality of the university’s academic programs. Conferences often provide the notable potential benefit of aligning a university with other institutions with as high or higher mean academic quality. The shared aims amongst institutions within a conference yield potential academic benefits for universities that join. Indeed, several institutions have switched conferences for reasons beyond athletics, including the intention of enhancing their academic prestige (Sweitzer, 2009). For instance, in the case of Maryland and Rutgers joining the Big Ten, “they are both members of the Association of American Universities — representing the nation’s top research universities — and have similar size, research scope and academic quality as other CIC schools” (Wurth, 2012).

In this study, we posit that university presidents and Boards of Trustees, whose main duties lie in improving and protecting the academic reputation of the school, choose to switch conferences based in part on reputational benefits in the new conference. We test the existence of such benefit directly as the overall change in the focal university’s reputation score based on the change in overall conference reputation (i.e., the old conference versus new conference aggregated reputations). This direct benefit is important because of all the potential other benefits that cascade from such a change in conference affiliation. These may include increased exposure of the university through membership with other highly reputable academic institutions, as an increase in student applications, the quality of those applications, an increase in alumni donations, an increase in business partnerships and an increase in government funding that fuels university research and allows the university to further support and develop its
Consequently, the motivation of university leadership to change conference affiliations (or allow a change in their conference’s member institutions) serves as an intriguing empirical setting for the analysis of the incentives of conference affiliation and the academic reputation impact when switching to a conference with higher prestige.

Sample and Hypothesis

Our sample is comprised of universities that make up the six Bowl Championship Series (BCS) conferences from 1985 to 2012 – the ACC, Big 10, Big 12, Big East, Pac 12, and SEC. We hypothesize that the universities that switch to such conferences will gain (lose) reputational capital in a manner positively related to the aggregate reputation of the members in their new conference. We will measure the change in the US News and World Report reputational scores, the highest weighted variable in the USNWR rankings, for individual universities that have made conference changes. We will examine this change as a function of the aggregated incumbent reputational scores for the conference they are joining, as well as the difference between this score and that of the exited conference. For robustness of any findings, we also propose to control for key other variables, including athletic and fiduciary benefits of conference switching.

Methods

We will test this with the entire set of universities that made conference switches to BCS conferences between 1985 and 2012. We will test this using panel data regression analysis, and specifically examine the impact of the switch across time on the reputation of the university after it realizes its new affiliation.

References


