NCAA Conference Realignment and its Effect on Donor Behavior

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Past research on donor behavior has primarily focused on the motivation to donate. Specifically, past studies have suggested that donors are primarily motivated by the overall improvement of the athletic department, ticket benefits, the assistance provided to student-athletes, the entertainment factor, promoting the university outside of the athletic programs, membership benefits, community enhancement, and psychological commitments (Gladden et al., 2005); however, limited research has focused on donor behavior in terms of conference realignment. The purpose of this study is to examine different institutions that have recently gone through NCAA divisional changes and how these changes have affected their overall donor behavior in terms of overall giving. For example, will donors contribute more to an athletic program that transitioned to Division I from a lower Division? Does the reclassification from Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) to Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) matter to donors? Are academic contributions affected by conference realignment? This study will help further advance the knowledge in donor behavior and help add to the importance of conference realignment decisions for universities and collegiate athletic administrators.

A donor list will be obtained by contacting the appropriate departments and administrators at each respective institution. Once the administrators are informed of the purpose of this study and eventual approval is received, an online survey utilizing the Qualtrics software will be sent and measure donor behavior include donation amounts before and after conference realignment and will include specific questions dedicated towards the likelihood of donation and donation amounts for both athletic and academic purposes. These questions will include “Are you more likely to donate to your institution’s athletic program because of the move to Division I and why?” and “Are you more likely to donate to your institution’s academic programs because of the move to Division I and why?”

The appropriate administrators in charge of donor relations will be contacted for open-ended interviews to obtain information on their use of their institution’s Division I move as a selling point for increased donation potential. These open-ended interviews will help answers questions of how these conference moves are being utilized to promote increased donations. According to Gladden, Mahony, and Apostolopoulou’s (2005) study, prime seating was one of the main motivations for donors. The surveys will help the researchers understand if the attractiveness of Division I competition will help increase these donations based on their findings.

Universities and collegiate athletic administrators can capitalize on the role of Division reclassification on donor behavior. If it is found that donors are more likely to donate to athletic and academic programs after a switch to Division I from Division II, universities can use this information to make decisions in terms of what moves would benefit the institution the most. Administrators in donor relations can use this information to promote their institutions in an attempt to increase overall donor contributions. Based on the qualitative findings, administrators can determine how best to use program moves to Division I as a marketing factor in increasing promoting both athletic and academic contributions.