

**CONFERENCE REALIGNMENT AND THE ROLE OF FACULTY
ATHLETICS REPRESENTATIVES**

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the role faculty athletics representatives (FARs) play in conference realignment decisions and the ensuing transitional period to a new conference. Conference realignment is not a new phenomenon but the speed at which, quantity of, and magnitude of these decisions fiscally, regionally, and the impact on student-athletes has continued to increase. Recent realignment decisions have impacted athletic department bottom lines (Hoffer & Pincin, 2015; Kramer II, 2016; Pincin & Hoffer, 2013), institutional prestige (Kramer II, 2016), historic rivalries (Havard & Eddy, 2013; Havard et al., 2013), and increased cross-country travel for student-athletes which impacts academic pursuits (Cleveland, 2022), athletic performance (Heller et al., 2024), and personal relationships (Paule-Koba et al., 2021).

For the substantial impact modern conference realignment has on the student-athlete experience and higher education institutions there has been little research on the topic. Furthermore, there has been none targeted on the involvement, roles, perspectives, and responsibilities of FARs in the conference realignment process. FARs have self-identified their three key responsibilities as ensuring institutional control of the athletic department, maintaining academic integrity, and guarding the welfare of student-athletes (Munger, 2014) all three pertaining to conference realignment and conference membership decisions.

The phenomenological study employed academic capitalism theory (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) to identify the role of FARs before, during, and after conference realignment decisions. Eleven of 12 FARs played no role in the decision to change athletic conferences, yet all 12 played important roles in serving student-athletes, fellow faculty members, and

institutional leaders during the conference transition. The next round of conference realignment is imminent, and it is important for FARs to learn from those that experienced the most recent round of realignment to implement best practices to effectively serve student-athletes and their institution.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The birth of intercollegiate athletics in America occurred in 1852 with a crew race between Yale University and Harvard University (Lewis, 1970). The ensuing three decades brought about increased competitions in different sports largely outside of institutional control until 1881 when Princeton University became the first institution to create a faculty athletics committee (FAC) to have oversight of intercollegiate athletics (Smith, 1983). By 1883, universities and FACs identified the need for ‘faculty control’ of athletics and a power struggle between faculty, coaches, alumni, and students ensued (Savage, 1929). Faculty control at most institutions included a faculty athletics leader who was the point person for athletics oversight. This individual was at times identified in documents as the faculty athletics leader or faculty athletics representative, yet the NCAA did not ratify the position until 1980 (Barr, 1999; Fulks, 2008; Miranda & Paskus 2013; Ramer, 1980).

It was these faculty members that are credited with the creation of the first intercollegiate athletics conference in 1888 when faculty from Albion College, Hillsdale College, Olivet College, and Michigan State University came together to establish the Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association (MIAA, 2023). The MIAA and other athletic conferences that followed suit were created for more structured athletic competitions and a regional alliance with peer institutions (MIAA, 2023). Many of these athletic conferences, including the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives – modern day Big Ten Conference (Big Ten) – were created and controlled completely

by faculty athletics leaders who oversaw conference membership, rules, and operations (Savage, 1929).

On December 28th, 1905 presidents and faculty athletics leaders from 68 different universities met to form what would become the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) in hopes of establishing a national governing body that could regulate and streamline rules (Barr, 1999; Fulks, 2008; Ramer, 1980). At the time faculty athletics leaders held immense control over operations of the NCAA and maintained control of athletic conferences. The successful launch of the NCAA was followed by the birth of more athletic conferences that, at the time, were faculty governed such as the Pac-12 Conference (Pac-12) in 1915. Faculty athletics leaders now held autonomy over the NCAA, athletic conference formation, conference membership, athletic competitions, rules creation, academic eligibility, and operations (Savage, 1929; SEC, 2022). Until 1922, athletics was directed by faculty who had a near monopoly on leadership of athletics governance until the emergence of athletic administrations where athletic directors (ADs) and coaches began to seek leadership (Savage, 1929).

In 1922, ADs and head coaches joined forces to create the Directors Conference which sought to gain control of athletics leadership from faculty (Savage, 1929). Most universities did not have athletics policies or a formalized oversight structure because university presidents had historically deferred to athletic conferences, the NCAA, or a university athletics committee which were all faculty led (Savage, 1929). This lack of formal structure and varying oversight across universities led to five decades of immense ambiguity in the oversight of athletic department operations, student-athletes, and competitions on campuses. By the 1950s animosity on campuses between parties had

increased due to unidentified responsibilities, uncertain leadership structures, and the dwindling of leadership of athletics by faculty athletics leaders to parties such as by ADs and coaches (Marco, 1960).

Faculty began pushing for renewed oversight and formalized leadership of athletics due to their ability to be a trusted force of governance for athletics and the ability to be free of scrutiny from external stakeholders which presidents, ADs, and coaches could not (Blackburn & Nyikos, 1974; Crase, 1974; Marco, 1960; Plant, 1961; White & Paterno, 1974). By 1977 the power struggle had reached new heights when the NCAA commissioned a two-year study on faculty athletics leaders, led by former NCAA President Earl Ramer (1980). The study sampled presidents, faculty athletics leaders, and ADs about the role of the faculty athletics leader on their campus and found substantial ambiguity in responsibilities of this individual, lack of a defined structure for the position, a vague selection process, and found nearly one in five NCAA member institutions had yet to identify a faculty athletics leader (Ramer, 1980).

This report led to reform of faculty oversight of athletics as it established the requirement that each NCAA member institution must identify a faculty athletics representative (FAR) to support student-athletes, fellow faculty, university administration, and to enact NCAA policies. Although the position of faculty athletics representative had been mentioned in literature and various bylaws for nearly a century, it was not ratified or required that NCAA member institutions have one until 1980 (Barr, 1999). In conjunction with this ratification, the NCAA developed the Faculty Athletics Representative Handbook and created the Faculty Athletics Representatives Association (FARA) (NCAA FARA, 1998; Ramer, 1980). FARA validated the FAR position and

provided a framework for modern collaboration between FARs across the country (Barr, 1999).

The ratification of the FAR came after 55 years of power struggles between key internal stakeholders: faculty, presidents, ADs, coaches, and student-athletes. In hopes of restoration of governance power to the faculty athletics leaders the NCAA formalized the position and identified the overarching responsibilities of the FAR to “ensure the academic integrity of the athletics program, to serve as an advocate for student-athlete well-being and to play a part in maintaining institutional control of the athletics program” (Miranda & Paskus, 2013, p.15).

Although formally recognized, the decline of FAR/faculty leadership of athletics continued decline as oversight from presidents increased as athletic conference operations like membership decisions (Duderstadt, 2003). Following the Supreme Court’s ruling in NCAA vs. Board of Regents University of Oklahoma (1984) the conference commissioner role expanded to include the signing television distribution deals on behalf of member institutions. The modern era of intercollegiate athletics and more specifically the modern era of conference realignment was born as presidents took oversight of athletic conferences and relationships with conference commissioners and television executives (Barr, 1999; Duderstadt, 2003; Ramer, 1980).

The clashing of ideals, leadership roles, and institutional goals from internal and external stakeholders over the ensuing five decades after NCAA vs. Oklahoma culminated in multiple waves of conference realignment decisions (Nwosu, 2015). A ‘cataclysmic wave’ began on July 30, 2021, when The University of Texas at Austin (Texas, 2021) and The University of Oklahoma (Oklahoma, 2021) announcing their

intentions to join the SEC (Schipper, 2021). ‘Seismic aftershock waves’ were felt exactly 11 months later with the depletion of the Pac-12 Conference (Dellenger, 2022). On June 30, 2022, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and University of Southern California (USC) announced their intention to leave the Pac-12 and join the Big Ten Conference (Big Ten) (UCLA, 2022; UCLA Athletics, 2022; USC, 2022; USC Athletics, 2022). Tumultuous times ensued in the following 15 months as the ten remaining Pac-12 member institutions conducted television distribution deal negotiations for the first time without UCLA and USC. By September 2023, the Pac-12 had dwindled to two member institutions after a mass exodus to the Big Ten, Big 12 Conference (Big 12) and the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC).

The Pac-12 Conference banished as we knew it after 100+ years of existence and all that was left to show for it were memories, 560 NCAA Championship trophies (over 200 more than any other athletic conference), financial reckonings for some of the Pac-12 member institutions, lawsuits between peer state institutions in California, Oregon, & Washington, and athletic departments developing plans on how to provide student-athletes with the same level of support before the most recent round of conference realignment and how to transport student-athletes effectively 2,500 miles coast to coast for regular season conference athletic competitions against new conference peers.

These ‘cataclysmic’ conference realignment decisions led to the demise of one of the five NCAA defined autonomous five or “Power Five” conferences and will impact student-athletes, institutions, alumni, fans, and historical rivalries. Across media coverage of the most recent wave of conference realignment – 2021-2024 – there is little to no mention of faculty or FAR role in conference realignment decisions. The Big Ten’s most

significant media partner – Fox – was identified as “a catalyst” (McCollough, 2023) and the “Quarterback of the Big Ten calling the plays” (Shatel, 2022) in UCLA and USC’s move to join the conference. Open records requests at the University of Washington found no conversations between the president and FAR in the pivotal moments of Washington’s decision to leave the Pac-12 for the Big Ten but plenty between the president and athletic director (Gutman, 2023). Media coverage of the recent conference shake-ups make it apparent that faculty athletics representatives’ engagement and impact on decisions is at an all-time low while external constituent control of athletics – conference commissioners and media/television executives – is at an all-time high (Shatel, 2022, McCollough, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

Conference realignment is not a new phenomenon but the speed at which, quantity of, and magnitude of these decisions fiscally, culturally, and the impact on student-athletes has continued to increase. Membership decisions have impacted athletic departments bottom lines (Hoffer & Pincin, 2015; Kramer II, 2016; Pincin & Hoffer, 2013), institutional prestige (Kramer II, 2016), marketability of an institution (Toma & Kramer II, 2009), historic rivalries (Havard & Eddy, 2013; Havard et al., 2013), attendance at sporting events (Groza, 2010), and competitive balance in conference athletic competitions (Quirk, 2004; Rhoads, 2004). Above all, 18–22-year-old student-athletes are impacted as prior research has found cross-country travel to impact academic pursuits (Cleveland, 2022), athletic performance (Heller et al., 2024), and personal relationships (Paule-Koba et al., 2021).

In the most recent round of conference realignment (2021-2024) the 10 member institutions that fled the Pac-12 for new conferences will now have peer institutions in Florida, New Jersey, Kentucky, Nebraska, New York, Massachusetts, West Virginia,

among others. For regular season conference competitions, Stanford University (Stanford) and University of California Berkeley (Cal) student-athletes will travel around 3,100 miles to compete against Boston College while UCLA, USC, University of Oregon (Oregon), and Washington student-athletes will travel approximately 2,750 miles to compete against Rutgers University (Rutgers) and the University of Maryland (Maryland), and University of Arizona (Arizona), Arizona State University (Arizona State), University of Colorado Boulder (Colorado), and University of Utah (Utah) will travel around 2,000 miles to compete against University of Central Florida (UCF) and West Virginia University (WVU). It is unclear the extent to which the academic impact of this travel was discussed or considered by institutions during realignment discussions and decision-making.

Financially, Stanford, Cal, Oregon State University (Oregon State), and Washington State University (Washington State) stand to have a decline in monetary distributions from their conference of a minimum of \$15M annually from at least 2024 through 2031 compared to their last year in the Pac-12 Conference (University of California Regents, 2024). Since 2010, budget issues led to the cutting of 5 athletic programs at Cal and 11 programs at Stanford. Cal and Stanford subsequently reinstated the programs, but time will tell if these programs will be cut again due to declines in revenues from conference distributions and increases in spending on things such as cross-country travel (Hill & Hensley-Clancy, 2021; Letourneau & Ingemi, 2023; Thomas, 2011).

As previously discussed, the key responsibilities of the FAR include ensuring institutional control of the athletic department, maintaining academic integrity, and guarding the welfare of student-athletes (Munger, 2014). Each of these responsibilities pertain to conference realignment decisions and unfortunately minimal research has

occurred on the role FARs play in conference realignment decisions. The next round of conference realignment is on the horizon, and it is important to understand the role the FAR has played in recent realignment to identify best practices and substantive roles that FARs can play to best support student-athletes, their institution, university leadership, and fellow faculty members during conference realignment decisions and conference transitions in the future.

Purpose Statement

The implosion of the 100+ year-old Pac-12 Conference in the matter of 15 months was the result of no single decision or one stakeholder, but instead the culmination of many decisions over decades. The financial implications mentioned above are miniscule in respect to the substantial impact conference realignment decisions have on student-athletes, athletic programs, historic rivalries, and higher education institutions. The purpose of this study is to identify what role (if any) faculty athletics representatives (FARs) play in modern conference realignment decisions and once the decision was made, the responsibilities during the transition.

For the substantial impact modern conference realignment and conference expansion has on the student-athlete experience and their academic pursuits there has been little to no research on the involvement, roles, perspectives, and responsibilities of stakeholders in the process. Afterall, FARs have self-identified their three key responsibilities as ensuring institutional control of the athletic department, maintaining academic integrity, and guarding the welfare of student-athletes (Munger, 2014) all three pertaining to conference realignment and membership decisions. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What role did faculty athletics representatives (FARs) play in FBS conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024?
 - a. Did this role vary based on the conference level or the type of conference movement?
2. How do faculty athletics representatives (FARs) describe their role in supporting stakeholders – student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership – during a change in conference membership?

Theoretical Framework

This study employed academic capitalism theory (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) to address the role of FARs before, during, and after conference realignment decisions are made. Academic capitalism theory looks at how higher education institutions change due to market-like decisions that occur from the desire for increased funding, prestige, enrollment, and other economic forces. Previously research in intercollegiate athletics has used academic capitalism theory to explain corporate partnership contracts, apparel, media distribution, and conference realignment.

The conference realignment portion of the aforementioned research will be built on in this study as realignment impacts student-athletes and the allocation of billions of dollars annually to higher education institutions. Analysis on what role faculty – in particular the FAR– play in the conference realignment decision process and the ensuing planning process for this conference change is pivotal to student-athletes, intercollegiate athletics, and higher education in its entirety.

Definitions of Key Terms

The below definitions are provided to ensure awareness and understanding of key terms used throughout this study.

- *Faculty Athletics Committee (FAC)*: In 1881, Princeton University became the first institution to establish a FAC which oversaw operations of varsity sports and student-athletes in the early days of intercollegiate athletics (Smith, 1983). Shortly after the creation of FACs these groups began designating a faculty athletics leader who served as the main point of contact for oversight on intercollegiate athletics.
- *Faculty Control*: A common phrase used to signify faculty holding oversight of intercollegiate athletics decisions and operations on their campus. According to some, the NCAA was chartered and grew to prominence due “to the spreading of the gospel of faculty control’ (Savage, 1929, p.13). Membership in the NCAA and many athletic conferences required faculty control that was led by one faculty athletics leader who was ultimately responsible for oversight of athletics (Savage, 1929).
- *Faculty Athletics Representative (FAR)*: The FAR position was ratified and became a requirement of member institutions by the NCAA in 1980. The identification and term faculty athletics representative had been in use for over a century before substantial ambiguity in the position and decline in faculty oversight of athletics led to formal identification of the FAR (Ramer, 1980). Duties of the FAR vary depending on the institution but typically include serving as the liaison between the institution and the athletics department,

supporting student-athletes in academic pursuits, and the institutions representative in many athletic conference and NCAA affairs (NCAA, 1998). More recently in surveys of FARs, three key responsibilities were identified: ensure institutional control of the athletic department, maintain academic integrity, and foster the welfare of student-athletes (Munger, 2014, p.64).

- *Conference or Athletic Conference*: A group of colleges and/or universities that conduct competition among members institutions to determine a conference champion. Only conferences that meet specific criteria as competitive and legislative bodies and minimum standards related to size and division status are permitted to vote on legislation or other issues before the Association (NCAA, 2022). Conferences can establish rules that go above and beyond NCAA rules if member institutions so desire. After NCAA vs. Board of Regents University of Oklahoma (1984), conference commissioners began reporting to presidents and started negotiating media distribution deals on behalf of their member institutions.
- *Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)*: The 134 Division I institutions that participate in the highest level of college football. The FBS houses the Autonomous Five (“Power Five”) & Non-Autonomous Five (“Group of Five”) Conferences.
- *Autonomous Five/Power Five Conferences*: Institutions that participate in the FBS and have the largest athletic department budgets. Members of this designation include the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten

Conference (Big Ten), Big 12 Conference (Big 12), or Southeastern Conference (SEC).

- The NCAA dubbed the term Autonomous Five due to an increase in voting power from the institutions that are members of these five conferences.
- The Pac-12 Conference has become commonly termed as the Pac-2 in mainstream media with Oregon State and Washington State being the only remaining members after the mass exodus of Pac-12 members between June 2022 and September 2023.
- As of April 2024, the Division I Board of Directors voted to remove the Pac-12 from the Autonomous Five in August of 2024 (NCAA, 2024). For continuity in this paper, the term ‘Power Five’ will still be used.
- *Non-Autonomy/Group of Five Conferences:* Institutions that participant in the FBS and are members of the American Athletic Conference (American), Conference USA (CUSA), Mid-American Conference (MAC), Mountain West Conference (MWC), and the Sun Belt Conference (SBC).
 - The Pac-12/Pac-2 is now a non-autonomy conference, but for this paper the term Group of Five will still be used.
- *Power Two Conferences:* The Big Ten and Southeastern Conference have increasingly been dubbed the ‘Power Two’ due to recent expansion of the conferences to include strong institutions and football brands; Oklahoma

(SEC), Texas (SEC), UCLA (Big Ten), USC (Big Ten), Oregon (Big Ten), and Washington (Big Ten).

- *Conference Realignment*: An institution/athletic department deciding to leave their current conference and accept membership in a different conference.
 - Example: On July 30, 2021 Oklahoma and Texas announced they would leave the Big 12 and join the SEC (Texas, 2021; Oklahoma, 2021).
 - On June 30, 2022 UCLA and USC announced they would leave the Pac-12 and join the Big Ten (UCLA, 2022; USC, 2022).
- *Conference Expansion*: A conference and its member institutions deciding to invite new institutions to increase their membership.
 - Example: The SEC's 14 member institutions decided to expand to 16 and offer membership to Oklahoma and Texas (SEC, 2021).
 - The Big Ten's 14 member institutions decided to expand to 18 and offer membership to UCLA, USC, Oregon, and Washington (Big Ten, 2023).

Significance of the Study

This study identified the role – or lack thereof – FARs had in conference realignment decisions between 2021-2024. Furthermore, once decisions were made how FARs supported student-athletes, faculty members, institutional leadership, athletic department staff, and other stakeholders. Even if FARs are not part of the conference realignment decision, they can still support student-athletes, other faculty members, and their institution in the transitional period.

Conference realignment decisions impact student-athletes (Cleveland, 2022; Heller et al., 2024; Paule-Koba et al., 2021), historic rivalries (Havard et al., 2013; Havard & Eddy, 2013), game day attendance (Groza, 2010), brand awareness of universities (Kramer II, 2016; Toma & Kramer II, 2009), competitive balance (Quirk, 2004; Rhoads, 2004), and revenue of athletic departments (Hoffer & Pincin, 2015; Kramer II, 2016; Pincin & Hoffer, 2013).

The three overarching responsibilities of the modern day FAR are ensuring institutional control of the athletic department, maintaining academic integrity, and looking after the well-being of student-athletes (Munger, 2014, p.64). The study explored the role in the backdrop of extensive conference realignment, decisions and a process in which a FAR should play a significant role.

FARs are tasked with supporting student-athlete well-being and providing resources needed for student-athletes to have success in the classroom and in competition. The identification of areas of support and leadership opportunities FARs can have in the conference realignment process would be beneficial as the next wave of conference realignment nears. It is important to expand the sparse literature on conference realignment and to identify the support FARs can provide throughout this process to best serve student-athletes, university administration, fellow faculty members, and campus constituents.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature in this study comes from two distinct yet connected areas of higher education research, faculty involvement in intercollegiate athletics leadership and athletic conference realignment. Due to the small amount of peer reviewed research on these two topics, there will be analysis on a few of each of the following: peer reviewed publications, applicable media articles, NCAA publications, publications by FARs on their perspective of the role, and books written by higher education leaders on their first-hand leadership experience of intercollegiate athletics.

The literature will be presented in chronological order to illustrate the longstanding relationship between faculty athletics leadership/FARs, and athletic department guidance, oversight of athletic competition for students, and the creation and administration of athletic conferences. Changes in conference membership is not a new phenomenon, but the speed at which, quantity of, financial implications, decisionmakers, and magnitude of these decisions have all changed and has become an increasingly important area of study.

Due to the recency of the cataclysmic impact of conference realignment there is a lack of research on the topic or the role that academic leaders just as FARs play in this process. Furthermore, the role of faculty – more specifically FARs – in oversight of intercollegiate athletics has evolved over time and based on the following analysis seem to have continued to decline more after the ratification of the FAR position by the NCAA in 1980.

The Evolution of Administrative Oversight of Intercollegiate Athletics

1852-1921 – Birth of Athletics, Faculty Control, Athletic Conferences, & the NCAA

The birth of intercollegiate athletics in America occurred in 1852 with a crew race between Yale University and Harvard University (Lewis, 1970). The ensuing three decades brought about increased competitions in different sports largely outside of institutional control. The number of days student-athletes would be away from campus, individuals competing who were not enrolled in courses, and athletes betting on their own games (Barr, 1999; Fulks, 2008; Ramer, 1980) led Princeton University to become the first institution to create a Faculty Athletics Committee (FAC) in 1881 (Smith, 1983). By 1883, FACs at many institutions began identifying a faculty member to serve as the primary administrator responsible for oversight of intercollegiate on campus (Barr, 1999).

These faculty athletics leaders obtained significant control of intercollegiate athletics on their campuses with oversight of athletic conference formation, conference membership, athletic competitions, and eligibility requirements (SEC, 2022). On March 24, 1888, faculty athletics leaders from Albion College, Hillsdale College, Olivet College, and Michigan State University formed the first athletic conference in the MIAA to create a regional alliance and structured athletic competitions between similar institutions (Sweitzer, 2009).

In the following three decades, eight conferences were formed including the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives (modern-day Big Ten), Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (modern-day Big 12), and the Ivy League (Savage, 1929). During this time the modern day Big Ten had substantial faculty oversight requirements for member institutions and would only grant conference

membership if faculty at the institution had “full and complete control of athletics” (Marco, 1960, p. 423). Similarly, the Southern Conference which evolved into the modern-day SEC required faculty members from member institutions to hold the majority of membership on committees and assume the full responsibility for carrying out the eligibility rules of the Conference (Savage, 1929, pp. 201).

Faculty-led athletic conferences continued to form and expand yet there was not a national governing body that could address the widespread growth of serious injuries and deaths resulting from athletics competition. On December 28th, 1905, faculty athletics leaders from 68 institutions and a handful of presidents met to form what would become the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) (Barr, 1999; Fulks, 2008; Ramer, 1980). Faculty athletics leaders gained significant oversight of this body and combined with their athletic conference leadership faculty held a near monopoly on rule creation, policy making, championship planning, conference membership, athletic competitions, eligibility requirements, and operations (Savage, 1929; SEC, 2022). The number of athletic conferences and power of the NCAA grew steadily as faculty continued their “injection of a kind of crusading spirit directed to the spreading of the gospel of ‘faculty control’ of athletics” (Savage, 1929, p. 13).

1922-1979 – Decline in Faculty Control & Ambiguity in Stakeholder Responsibilities

In 1922, athletic directors and coaches established the Directors Conference to unite in their hope to take administrative oversight of athletics away from faculty (Savage, 1929). For the next 50 years there was back and forth of leadership responsibilities between faculty and staff – coaches and athletic department leadership – on who controlled oversight of athletic department operations, student-athletes, and

competitions on campuses. By the 1950s there was immense ambiguity in the governance of college athletics and varied substantially from one campus to another with each institution identifying its own leadership structures and responsibilities for presidents, FARs, ADs, and coaches.

This ambiguity and the decline in faculty oversight led faculty at institutions such as The Ohio State University (Ohio State) to go to the Board of Trustees to request and recommend heightened faculty oversight of Ohio State Athletics. Although the Trustees voted in 1956 for increased oversight of athletics by faculty, little changed at Ohio State and other institutions that sought similar changes to the structure of athletics leadership. In 1960 the Faculty Council of Ohio State requested a meeting with other Big Ten member institutions to draft a constitution for conference operations and to identify responsibilities of institutional leadership such as presidents, athletic directors, and faculty (Marco, 1960). In conjunction with other Big Ten faculty members, Marco (1960) hypothesized that without proper leadership designations and faculty oversight, there would be more undesirable outcomes from athletics operations, continued declines to the educational ideals of higher education, and athletics would end up being unable to perform important educational obligations.

Faculty unrest grew in conjunction with a continued push for renewed oversight by faculty athletics leaders of intercollegiate athletics. This push arose from immense ambiguity, increased visibility of athletics, faculty members ability to be free of force from external constituents such as donors, and a longstanding and trusting force of governance for athletics (Blackburn & Nyikos, 1974; Crase, 1974; Plant, 1961; White & Paterno, 1974). Further calls for structural leadership change of athletics occurred in

ways such as a push for presidents to hire a faculty member in the role of athletic director to oversee the department like a dean does for an academic unit (Shea & Wieman, 1967, pp. 60-61).

By 1977 faculty unrest and the power struggle between stakeholders had reached new heights when the NCAA Executive Committee commissioned a two-year study on faculty athletics representatives (FARs). Ramer's (1980) study surveyed presidents, FARs, and ADs about the role of FARs on their campus. This survey found that although 80% of NCAA member institutions had FARs the position remained undefined and never officially ratified by the NCAA (Ramer, 1980).

This report led to reform of faculty oversight of athletics as it established the requirement that each NCAA member institution must have a FAR, developed the Faculty Athletics Representative Handbook, and created the Faculty Athletics Representatives Association (FARA) (Ramer, 1980). FARA validated the FAR position and provided a framework for modern collaboration between FARs across the country (Barr, 1999).

1980-1990 – Presidents Seize Control of NCAA and Athletic Conferences

The 1980 ratification and restoration of governance power to the FAR position by the NCAA formalized the overarching responsibilities of the FAR; “ensure the academic integrity of the athletics program, to serve as an advocate for student-athlete well-being and to play a part in maintaining institutional control of the athletics program” (Miranda & Paskus, 2013, p.15). Tegano (1980) conducted a survey of 139 Division I FBS faculty athletics leaders and the 98 respondents claimed leadership ambiguity made their roles more difficult and pushed for a more significant leadership role with decision-making

power in athletics matters. Although formally recognized, the decline of leadership by FARs continued as involvement from presidents and conference commissioners increased (Barr, 1999; Ramer, 1980).

In 1984, presidents collaborated to create the NCAA Presidents Commission which established formal power and administrative oversight of the NCAA. This coincided with the increasingly used phrase of 'institutional control' which provided presidents with the ultimate responsibility for all aspects of an institution's athletics department (NCAA, 2000). In fact, a president stated the day the NCAA charged their institution with lack of institutional control, was the worst day of their tenure as president at that institution (Munger, 2014). This newfound interest in athletics administration from presidents stemmed from prominent high-profile NCAA enforcement cases and the Supreme Court's ruling that the NCAA Television Plan violated antitrust laws (*NCAA vs. Board of Regents University of Oklahoma*, 1984).

Frey (1987) conducted a literature analysis of top higher education journals, books authored by presidents, and dissertations from 1980 through 1986 on the topic of leadership of intercollegiate athletics. These findings included; presidents and ADs did not believe increased oversight from presidents would adversely impact the autonomy of athletic directors (Gerdy, 1986), administrators had a net positive view of athletics and belief that athletics make positive contributions to campus life and university goals (Garrett, 1985), and 26 presidents interviewed viewed themselves as the most important leader with the final say on athletics matters (Gilley & Hickey, 1986).

This analysis occurred in the same time frame as Smith (1988) which found presidents began increasing their oversight of intercollegiate athletics because of financial

and economic difficulties at higher education institutions, external pressure from trustees, who demanded winning athletic programs, and faculty who were anxious that the rise of commercialization of athletics would negatively impact academic values. The culmination of these increased pressures led presidents to take a more hands on leadership approach to athletics on their campus and in 1984 presidents launched the NCAA's Presidents Commission.

In June 1985 the Presidents Commission held a special convention on cost containment of athletics which began the formal takeover of power of the NCAA (Smith, 1988). In the years following presidents began taking grasp of leadership of the NCAA by creating an NCAA Executive Committee and Board of Directors tasked to govern intercollegiate athletics with much of the committee being presidents (Smith, 1988). Presidents had taken leadership of the NCAA and updated legislation to take formal power from faculty members (Smith, 1986). "There is no doubt who is running college sports. It's the college presidents." (Smith, 1986, pp. 996).

With a grasp on leadership of the NCAA, presidents still did not have significant oversight of conferences. Conference operations and leadership were still heavily controlled by faculty, athletic directors, coaches, and conference staff who oversaw conference membership decisions, scheduling of competition, hosting of championships, and some rule oversight handled outside of the realm of the NCAA. Conference oversight and responsibilities were minor in retrospect due to the lack of cash flows with the only revenue stream being ticket sales from conference tournaments and membership fees that member institutions were required to pay. This all began to change in 1982 when the Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma and the University of Georgia Athletics

Association sued the NCAA over the NCAA Television Plan (*Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma and University of Georgia Athletic Association v. NCAA*, 1982; *NCAA vs. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, 1984).

In 1951 NCAA membership approved the creation of the NCAA Television Plan which required institutions to grant their broadcasting rights to the NCAA who would then negotiate on behalf of all universities (Tolbert & Meyers, 2018). By 1971 the NCAA had complete control of contracts with television networks, the fiscal allocation of these deals, kickoff times, and what games would be broadcasted on television (Rand, 1984). Institutions grew uneasy as they believed they had no control over their ability to generate increased media exposure or revenues from television opportunities and there became a growing movement to abandon the NCAA Television Plan.

The Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma and the University of Georgia Athletic Association sued the NCAA in hopes of regaining their right to broadcast football games on their campuses by leaving the NCAA Television Plan. The District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma found the NCAA was in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act in television distribution by participating in boycotts, monopolization, and defined the NCAA as a “classic cartel” (*Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma and University of Georgia Athletic Association v. NCAA*, 1982).

The United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit heard the NCAA’s appeal and affirmed the district court’s decision by implementing the Sherman Antitrust Act’s per se rule and the rule of reason (*NCAA vs. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, 1983). These two rulings in favor of Oklahoma and Georgia led the NCAA to appeal once more to the United States Supreme Court, who agreed that the NCAA’s

Television Plan violated section one of the Sherman Antitrust Act (*NCAA vs. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, 1984).

The court's ruling in favor Oklahoma and Georgia opened the door for institutions to oversee broadcasting rights and negotiate television distribution deals (Calvin et al., 2019). The NCAA retained control of rules, student-athlete eligibility, and other governance decisions but lost the ability to generate millions of dollars annually from the control of media distribution deals to broadcast football games.

Entering uncharted territory, institutions were required to figure out how to best negotiate their broadcasting rights to maximize visibility, marketability, and revenue. With the College Football Association (CFA) having already negotiated a broadcast deal with NBC – albeit while still deemed illegal per NCAA rules – CFA member institutions signed their broadcast rights over to the CFA who already had a contract for members. Institutions that were members of conferences not in the CFA began to sign their broadcasting rights over to their athletic conference. The conference office – typically the conference commissioner – would then negotiate media distribution deals with television networks on behalf of member institutions. However, to this point conferences did not have a defined leadership structure in place to handle oversight of the conference or conference commissioner.

A decade earlier, Congress passed The Tax Reform Act of 1976 which included a provision that organizations overseeing amateur athletics can be identified as tax-exempt charitable entities through 501c3 incorporation (Colombo, 2010; The Tax Reform Act, 1976). Conferences began filing documents to become 501c3 non-profit entities that were led by a commissioner who reported to a board of directors that was comprised of the

presidents from member institutions (Duderstadt, 2003). Now having formal oversight of conference commissioners, presidents had leadership responsibilities over all athletic conference operations including media distribution deals and membership decisions that were to be made on behalf of conference member institutions (Duderstadt, 2003).

In the aftermath of NCAA vs. University of Oklahoma Regents faculty oversight and the impact of FARs on college athletics fell to an all-time low (Rand, 1984). The single most important individuals in the oversight of intercollegiate athletics, NCAA reform, and athletic conference decisions had become presidents (Atwell, 1991). In Duderstadt's (2003) comprehensive and historical overview of the roles of presidents in athletics leadership – written from his perspective as President of the University of Michigan – solidified that presidents had retained oversight of athletics and conference leadership during what became the first period of conference realignment in the modern era. Commercialization of intercollegiate athletics and the impact on college athletics from external stakeholders such as conference commissioners and media network executives were at an all-time high, yet the control and impact of FARs had dwindled to an all-time low.

The Modern Era of Conference Realignment

Throughout the first century of intercollegiate athletics conferences were formed, and conference realignment decisions were made by faculty based on geography, institution size, and similarities between institutions (Sweitzer, 2009). The NCAA's loss of 'monopolistic control' of television broadcast deals led to the beginning of the modern era of conference realignment. Conferences began to expand their membership in 1990 with institutions that had historical football success in hopes of maximizing marketability

and television revenue (Shulman & Bowen, 2012; Siegfried & Gardner-Burba, 2004). Nwosu (2015) used literature and media sources to identify three ‘waves’ – first (1990-1996), second (2003-2005), and third (2010-2013). – of modern conference realignment. The following sections will expand upon these three waves and introduce a fourth (2021-2024) wave in the modern era of conference realignment.

The Modern Era of Conference Realignment – First Wave (1990-1996)

The Supreme Court’s ruling in favor of Oklahoma in NCAA vs. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma (1984) allowed institutions to leave the NCAA Television Plan. This decision led to an evolution in the reasons for conference realignment and in many ways the birth of the modern era of conference realignment. Institutions and athletic departments obtained the ability to negotiate their own football television broadcast rights outside of the purview of the NCAA and propelled power football programs to entrust media distribution contracts to the CFA or their athletic conference (Dunnivant, 2004). For the first-time athletic conference membership impacted revenue opportunities and the ability to broadcast football games on television.

In 1977, 63 institutions formed the College Football Association (CFA) to assist in lobbying efforts for members especially as it pertained to television broadcasting rights. Once the CFA was able to negotiate television deals after NCAA vs. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma (1984) ruling, members became frustrated due to the anticipation of increased revenues. In 1990 Notre Dame became the first institution to leave the CFA in hopes of generating a larger financial windfall and more autonomy by securing their own television contract with NBC (Oriard, 2009).

With Notre Dame finding greater revenues, more autonomy, and stronger marketability outside of the CFA, other institutions began to follow suit. Penn State University – formerly a CFA member and conference independent – joined the Big Ten Conference, University of Miami – formerly an independent – joined the Big East Conference, and University of Arkansas – formerly a CFA member and Southwest Conference member – joined the Southeastern Conference (SEC) (Dunnivant, 2004). These four decisions by institutions with premier football programs marked the first round of movement in the modern era of conference realignment and illustrated that football broadcasting deals and media distributions had become a key decision point in conference realignment decisions.

Broadcast rights and conference realignment go hand in hand (Karcher, 2012). Yasser et al. (2011) posits that all conference realignment decisions for institutions and conferences are motivated by economics and capitalistic behaviors. For conferences, adding members – conference expansion – can increase the geographic footprint and the number of television markets. The ability to expand to 12 members allowed the conference to host a conference championship game which is lucrative due to ticket sales and television distribution rights for the game (Yasser et al., 2011). The SEC added not only Arkansas, but also the University of South Carolina (South Carolina) in order to reach this 12-member threshold to host a football conference championship game. This expansion coincided with the SEC negotiating the most lucrative television distribution deal in college athletics history with a 5-year, \$85 million contract with Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) (Nite & Washington, 2017). Arkansas and South Carolina

joining the SEC and Penn State joining the Big Ten served as a precursor of the ‘Power Two’ that the Big Ten and SEC would evolve into (Prisbell, 2024).

The combination of changes in the leadership of intercollegiate athletics and the external impact of media corporations through television deals led to the new modern era of commercialism and conference realignment in college athletics. Presidents took control of NCAA governance and conference leadership as the financial and marketing implications of television distribution rights became a way to increase revenues, institutional brand, and the prestige of the institutions that were conference peer institutions. As faculty oversight of college athletics continued to decline, revenues and impact from external, non-university employed stakeholders had increased to historic highs. One area of oversight that historically belonged to faculty was conference membership of their athletic department and leadership of the athletic conference in relation to what institutions to offer membership. Based on first-hand historical accounts we can derive that this was no longer the decision-making framework in the modern era of conference realignment (Crouthamel, 2000a; Crouthamel, 2000b; Duderstadt, 2003).

The Big East Conference was formed in the spring of 1978 due to NCAA basketball in-season scheduling requirements that made it difficult for programs to remain independent (Crouthamel, 2000a). The athletic directors from Syracuse University (Syracuse), Providence University, St. John’s University, and Georgetown University collaborated to create a conference that addressed these basketball scheduling difficulties and offered membership based on quality of men’s basketball, regionality with a northeast preference, and significant media markets (Crouthamel, 2000a). In 1990, after the Supreme Court granted institutions their rights to football broadcasting rights,

the Big East expanded and their requirements for member institutions evolved with regionality now spanning the entire east coast and institutions that were not basketball powers, but also football powerhouses such as The University of Miami (Miami) (Adelson, 2021).

The first wave of the modern era of conference realignment concluded with the demise of the historic Southwest Conference (SWC) in 1996. After announcements of Arkansas leaving for the SEC in 1990 and Baylor, Texas, Texas A&M, and Texas Tech leaving for the Big 12 in 1994 the SWC dwindled to Rice University (Rice), Southern Methodist University (SMU), and Texas Christian University (TCU). With no institutions to backfill the departures of conference peers Rice, SMU, and TCU sunset the SWC and joined the Western Athletic Conference (WAC).

By 1996 the first wave of the modern era of conference realignment had concluded with conferences negotiating television distribution deals on behalf of member institutions, institutions no longer being able to be football independents – except for Notre Dame – due to power of grouping in television distribution deals, football became the most important sport in conference realignment decisions due to the ability to increase viewership, marketability, and revenues of a conference (Crouthamel, 2000b), and final decisions were being made by presidents and conference commissioners who for the first time were working in conjunction with television network executives (Adelson, 2021; Crouthamel, 2000b).

The Modern Era of Conference Realignment – Second Wave (2003-2005)

In May 2003, the ACC sought to expand from nine to 12 members to fulfill the NCAA's requirement of 12 member institutions to have a football championship game,

which was anticipated to generate \$12 million annually (\$1 million per institution) (Droschak, 2003). This conference realignment decision served as the first one of the internet era and garnered immense articles on ESPN.com and other sites (Katz, 2003c). The significant findings of this round were the identification of the decision-makers, the speed of decisions, lawsuits that were generated by attorney generals of states, and lobbying efforts of high-ranking political figures.

The ACC's expansion was led by the conference commissioner who held five conference calls within two weeks to get ACC presidents support to add Miami and Virginia Tech (Katz, 2003b). The expansion vote was approved on May 13th and Miami and Virginia Tech were invited for membership by June 25th and within four days both accepted the invitations (Droschak, 2003; Katz, 2003c). From the day the ACC decided to expand to the acceptance of membership offers occurred was a total of 47 days. These two findings illustrated the decision-makers and timeline in this wave of realignment.

In sync with these conference calls, the Attorney General of Connecticut filed a lawsuit on behalf of five football Big East member institutions against the ACC, Miami, and Virginia Tech. The Attorney General of Florida countersued and forced the dismissal of the Connecticut Attorney General's lawsuit (Katz, 2003a; Katz, 2005; Orlando Sentinel, 2003). Finally, Governor Mark Warner of Virginia made calls to ACC presidents, athletic directors, UVA Trustees, and Governors of ACC member institution states to lobby for Virginia Tech to receive an ACC invitation (WRIC ABC 8 News, 2019). These findings show the introduction of political figures in the conference realignment process. With elected officials initiating lawsuits between universities, states,

and conferences and others lobbying on behalf of their state institutions illustrates the increased prominence of political engagement in conference realignment decisions.

The Modern Era of Conference Realignment – Third Wave (2010-2013)

The modern era of conference realignment continued to evolve and became increasingly impactful with each round of television distribution deal. Conference realignment cared less about geography, historical rivalries, and academic reputation of an institution in realignment decisions. This round saw the expansion of conferences past 12 members for the first time, which led to the third wave of conference realignment.

In this wave, politicians continued to lobby on behalf of institutions in their state. Senator Joe Manchin (West Virginia) successfully supported his alma mater West Virginia University (WVU) in their pursuit of an offer to join the Big 12 Conference. Senator Mitch McConnell (Kentucky) stepped in at the 12th hour in pursuit of his alma mater, the University of Louisville to steal the membership offer that was being granted to WVU (Raju, 2011).

The biggest new finding in this wave of conference realignment was that external stakeholders – not only, conference commissioners but now television executives – were a substantial part of the decision-making process on what institutions a conferences should invite to their membership. With the Big Ten having successfully launched the Big Ten Network in conjunction with FOX, the Southeastern Conference sought to follow suit with the launch of the SEC Network (Talty, 2015). With the desire to increase the number of households in the conference footprint, SEC Commissioner Mike Slive led the charge to add the University of Missouri and Texas A&M University in 2011 and by 2013 Slive and ESPN President John Skipper jointly announced a 20-year partnership

between the SEC and ESPN which would begin with the launch of the SEC Network. The timing of this announcement signaled the importance of the increase of 10,000,000 households in the SEC's footprint with the addition of Missouri and Texas A&M (Talty, 2015).

The Modern Era of Conference Realignment – Fourth Wave (2021-2024)

The previous wave was a precursor to the external stakeholder influence by television executives on conference realignment decisions. The fourth wave featured a much more substantial impact from executives at the likes of FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC/ESPN, and Apple (Gutman, 2023; Mandel & Olson, 2023). Furthermore, and more impactful, the speed with which conference realignment began to occur, the goal of upward mobility, the secrecy of negotiations, and the significant amounts of money that conferences allocate. This evolution climaxed with a cataclysmic round of realignment decisions that led to the implosion of a 100+ year old conference (Wetzel, 2022).

After a seven-year hiatus of Power Five conference realignment decisions a shockwave was felt throughout intercollegiate athletics. On July 30, 2021, Big 12 charter members the University of Oklahoma and the University of Texas at Austin announced their intention to join the Southeastern Conference (SEC) (Oklahoma, 2021; Texas, 2021). Within five weeks, the Big 12 replaced the two defecting institutions with the addition of four institutions in Brigham Young University (BYU), University of Central Florida (UCF), University of Cincinnati (UC), and University of Houston (Houston) (Big 12 Conference, 2021). This speed at which Oklahoma and Texas were replaced reiterated that this round of conference realignment would be more rapid than those prior.

June 30, 2022, UCLA and USC announced their intention to leave the Pac-12 Conference (Pac-12) and join the Big Ten (UCLA Athletics, 2022 & USC Athletics, 2022). This realignment decision was “tectonic in nature for college sports overall and cataclysmic for many portions of it, namely the Pac-12 schools left behind” (Wetzel, 2022, Para. 6). The following 13 months brought upon tumultuous times and turmoil as the Pac-12 conducted media distribution negotiations without the Los Angeles/Southern California footprint. Without anchor institutions UCLA and USC, Pac-12 Commissioner George Kliavkoff was unable to secure a media distribution deal that would suffice for the 10 remaining institutions during the Pac-12’s early renegotiation window in fall of 2022 (Williams et al., 2023).

Shockwaves were felt again on October 30, 2022, when the Big 12 Conference (Big 12) ‘jumped’ the Pac-12 in the media distribution deal line by announcing a deal with ESPN and Fox. After less than three months on the job, Big 12 Conference Commissioner Brett Yormark signed a six-year, \$2.28 billion contract with ESPN and Fox (Thamel, 2022). Providing media-only revenue to member institutions of \$31.7 million annually and interestingly, a pro-rata clause in the contract (Smith, 2022). This pro-rata clause provided the Big 12 raises in their media distribution deal of \$31.7 million for each Power Five school added to the conference membership. On July 27, 2023, the Big 12 took advantage of this pro-rata clause and offered the University of Colorado Boulder (Colorado) membership. Colorado left the Pac-12 after 12 years and returned to the Big 12 where they had a guaranteed linear media distribution deal and financial stability (Snyder, 2023).

On August 1, 2023, Pac-12 Conference Commissioner George Kliavkoff hosted a virtual meeting to present a media distribution deal to the nine remaining member institutions' presidents and athletic directors (Gutman, 2023). This exclusive deal with Apple was reported to be a streaming deal with no linear (cable television) component which was worth \$23 million per member institution annually with potential increases if subscriber thresholds were met (Vorel, 2023). University of Washington President and AD exchanged text messages during the virtual meeting saying “We need to weigh against other options. But yes not what we wanted” and “Its not close. This is bad!”, respectively (Gutman, 2023, para. 60; Mandel & Olson, 2023).

This media distribution deal was insufficient for some member institutions and led more universities to vacate membership in the Pac-12. Within the matter of three days, the Pac-12 Conference imploded after 100+ years of existence and 560 NCAA Championships (over 200 more than the next highest conference) (Pac-12 Conference, 2023). Pac-12 founding members University of Oregon (Oregon) and University of Washington (Washington) announced their plan to join the Big Ten breaking a longstanding conference allegiance with state peer institutions Oregon State University (Oregon State) and Washington State University (Washington State). A few hours later, University of Arizona (Arizona), Arizona State University (Arizona State), and University of Utah (Utah) announced their intention to follow Colorado to the Big 12 Conference.

These cataclysmic shockwaves were felt throughout intercollegiate athletics and left four Pac-12 member institutions seeking acceptance from new conferences or potential merger opportunities. On September 1, 2023, the University of California,

Berkeley (Cal) and Stanford University (Stanford) announced their move to the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). Exactly 14 months after UCLA and USC announced their intention to leave the Pac-12 only two member institutions remained. The two lone remnants of the Pac-12 – Oregon State and Washington State – had a future as foggy as the Pacific Northwest region the institutions reside in.

The aftermath of decisions included frustration from elected officials and political appointees such as California Governor Gavin Newsom for UCLA’s realignment decision happening ‘in silence’ (Michaelson & Newsom, 2022), multiple court battles between state peer institutions (*Washington State University & Oregon State University vs. The Pac-12 Conference, 2023; Washington et al. vs. Pac-12 Conference et al., 2023*), and UC Regents imposing a ‘tax’ on UCLA to provide to UC System peer Cal \$10 million annually for at least three years due to declines in revenue Cal will face from conference realignment (University of California Regents, 2024). The process of the 15-month churning of Pac-12 membership may create irreparable damages on the relationships between athletic departments at public peer institutions in California (UCLA & Cal), Oregon (Oregon & Oregon State), and Washington (Washington & Washington State).

The stakeholders and impact of this most recent round of conference realignment has yet to be studied so the timing of this research is pertinent. The literature and media coverage on conference realignment show that FARs might not play a substantial role, but that has not come from the mouths’ of FARs, so it is important to identify the role FARs played in the most modern round of conference realignment decisions firsthand. It is just as important to identify the areas of support and responsibilities FARs held after

the conference realignment decision was made. These findings will assist FARs and higher education administrators in the future for best practices on how to best serve student-athletes, institution leadership, and fellow faculty members during times of transition.

Conference Realignment Frameworks

In the last decade, various frameworks have been employed in the analysis of conference realignment decisions including strategic groups (Herbst-Lucke, 2022), oligopoly (Mathewson, 2012), agency (principal-agent) (Kramer II, 2014; Kramer II, 2016; Nwosu, 2015), institutional – neo-institutional (Herbst-Lucke, 2022; Kramer II, 2014; Kramer II, 2016), resource dependence (Kramer II, 2014; Kramer II, 2016), rational-decision making (Guin, 2015), and academic capitalism (Kramer II, 2014). Kramer II (2014) and Nwosu (2015) were the only two that interviewed faculty in their research but neither study focused on faculty perspectives or solely on the role of the FAR in conference realignment decisions and the aftermath of those decisions.

Faculty and Faculty Athletics Representatives Perceptions of Athletics

The focus of this section will be on faculty governance, faculty perception of athletics, and the role of the FAR. Only a small percentage of this literature focuses on the oversight role of faculty on intercollegiate athletics, this literature employs social identity theory (Martyn et al., 2019), goal theory (Trail & Chelladurai, 2000), organizational theory (Brown, 2015; Estler & Nelson, 2005), institutional theory (Kramer II, 2014), and academic capitalism theory (King & Slaughter, 2004; Sack, 2009; Kramer II, 2014). This section will focus on FAR perspectives from the last decade of literature and on the academic capitalism theory.

Over the past decade FARs from a handful of FBS institutions – Boise State University (Munger, 2014), University of Mississippi (Rychlak, 2013), Southern Methodist University (Rogers III, 2018), and Texas Tech University (Shannon, 2017) – have published their experiences as the FAR and perspectives of the FAR role. These publications provide experiences that help identify perspectives and responsibilities of the FAR in the modern era of intercollegiate athletics.

Themes that derived from these four accounts included the need for open collaboration, a proactive approach to leadership, assistance with institutional control, and the belief there has been a continuous decline in the input of FARs overtime. Collaboration of FARs is important not only with internal constituents – presidents, athletic directors, athletic department senior staff, and other faculty members – but also with external constituents – FARs at conference peer institutions and service on various committees at the institutional, conference, and NCAA level – (Shannon, 2017).

Each FAR pushed for proactive engagement and leadership style that requires the FAR to exert themselves to campus constituents and external stakeholders. Lack of institutional control is one of the worst sanctions an institution can receive from the NCAA and the FARs identified the need to help support campus constituents stay in line with NCAA and conference rules. Finally, there was a consistent theme that the overall power of the FAR has declined overtime and remains diminished to this day, but this should not stop a FAR from proactive leadership with faculty and athletics operations to best serve student-athletes and their institution (Munger, 2014; Shannon, 2017).

Munger (2014) went further in his work by conducting a survey of all faculty athletics representatives which received more than 160 responses. The study confirmed

that responsibilities of FARs can vary based on the institution, but ultimately found consistent agreement that the three main responsibilities of FARs in modern era of intercollegiate athletics are to ‘ensure institutional control of the athletic department, maintain academic integrity, and foster the welfare of student-athletes’ (Munger, 2014, p.64). These three overarching responsibilities pertain immensely to conference realignment decisions because of the impact that these decisions have on institutions and student-athletes.

Academic Capitalism Theory

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) established academic capitalism theory to explain the evolution to an economically driven higher education system where institutions, departments, faculty, staff, and administration engage in market-driven behaviors that seek autonomy, sustainability, and fiscal stability. This evolution in thinking has led to changes in the roles, responsibilities, and values of faculty, staff, and administrations (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). One of the most substantial organizational changes identified by academic capitalism was the centralization of decisions which decreased faculty input and provided greater authority for administrators (Lawrence & Ott, 2013; Rhoades, 1998; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) identify market-driven behaviors as for-profit activities that institutions undertake to generate revenue and potential non-monetary gains such as heightened prestige, which ultimately will lead to monetary gains in the future. Ultimately, academic capitalism is a framework employed in higher education literature that emphasizes the importance of the bottom line (Bok, 2003; Kirp, 2003; Sack, 2009; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Previously, academic capitalism

has been used to explain university contracts and athletic partnerships with external corporations such as Nike to license logos and sale sports paraphernalia in exchange for financial guarantees (King & Slaughter, 2004).

Sack (2009) identifies three frameworks – intellectual elitist, athletes rights, and academic capitalist – to employ in research of ‘commercial college sports’. Academic capitalism is employed to explain why presidents have allowed athletic departments to conduct marketing practices and revenue negotiations like professional sports leagues (Sack, 2009). Sack (2009) expands further with the claim that “in an era when academic departments are often viewed as revenue centers, students as customers, and the priorities of higher education are determined less by the institution than by donors, corporations, and politicians, the current emphasis on aggressively marketing college sport (King & Slaughter, 2004) seems more consistent with general university policy than it might have in the past” (Sack, 2009, pp. 78-79).

Former University of Oregon, Indiana University, & NCAA President Dr. Myles Brand made arguments that pushed academic capitalism in conjunction with a full integration of athletics into the greater academic institution due to the positive influences athletics has on campus culture (Brand, 2006). Brand (2009) identified three revenue streams including an increase in commercial activity, with an emphasis on external revenues from conference media distributions and corporate partners. If an athletic department is not financially self-sufficient it will rely on contributions from donors and increased support from the institution and student fees but Brand (2009) states this investment is worth it due to increased visibility, brand recognition, and community growth. Marketing exposure from exposure and success in athletics can result in

increased application rates, campus morale, and community building (Brand, 2009). The commercialism of athletics can financially impact athletic departments and the broader institution.

Academic capitalism has been stated to be a frame to explain the athletic conference realignment process and the interplay between revenue-seeking and visibility increases (Kramer II, 2014). The framework could be used to explain the role of various campus constituents in the decision-making process (Kramer II, 2014).

This study employed academic capitalism theory (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) as a framework to study the role of the FAR before, during, and after conference realignment decisions are made. Conference realignment in intercollegiate athletics impacts the student-athlete experience for thousands of student-athletes and the allocation of billions of dollars annually to higher education institutions. Analysis on what role faculty – in particular faculty athletics representatives – play in the conference realignment decision process and the ensuing planning process for this conference change is pivotal to student-athletes, college athletics, and higher education in its entirety.

Shortcomings in Literature

There are substantial shortcomings in research on conference realignment in intercollegiate athletics and even more shortcomings on the role FARs play in this process. It is important to identify the role FARs play in these decisions and in the preparation for conference changes which can impact the flow of billions of dollars and the well-being of student-athletes.

Mainstream coverage of conference realignment has minimal mentions of faculty or FARs in conference realignment and conference expansion decisions. A qualitative

study is needed to study how FARs perceive their role in institutional decisions to leave one conference to join another.

As it pertains to FARs, more research is needed on their role and best practices for supporting student-athletes and other stakeholders during the conference realignment process. There is no research on the role FARs should play once conference realignment decisions are made. The ability to identify the responsibilities and provide a framework for FARs to follow when conference realignment decisions occur could be impactful for FARs and their support of internal and external stakeholders.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to identify the role of the faculty athletics representative (FAR) in conference realignment decisions and the support provided by FARs in the ensuing conference membership transition process at NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) member institutions. This study researched FARs perspectives, roles, and impact before, during, and after the conference realignment process and was guided by the following questions:

Research Questions

1. What role did faculty athletics representatives (FARs) play in FBS conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024?
 - a. Did this role vary based on the conference level or the type of conference movement?
2. How do faculty athletics representatives (FARs) describe their role in supporting stakeholders – student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership – during a change in conference membership?

To answer these research questions, the researcher employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological study was utilized to address these research questions as open-ended questions allowed participants to describe in depth what they experienced and how they experienced it (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Phenomenological studies also provide the opportunity for participants to speak in depth about their roles, thoughts, and personal experiences (Husserl, 1931, Anderson & Spencer, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Moustakas, 1994). This research study used Moustakas' (1994) methodology for conducting phenomenological research and subsequently the phenomenological reduction approach for generating findings from participants in the study.

Phenomenological studies have been used in a breadth of higher education and intercollegiate athletics research. Examples of phenomenological studies in intercollegiate athletics research include; the perception of 16 athletics & academic administrators at FBS institutions on shared governance of athletics (Fine, 2017), the experience of 15 student-athletes speaking on support services athletic departments provided to assist in preparation for life after athletic competition (Menke & Germany, 2019), how success was found by 27 Pac-12 African American student-athletes in the classroom and athletic competition (Martin et al., 2010), and first-hand experiences of 19 student-athletes to identify better ways to improve student-athletes academic experience and communication with faculty members (Godfrey & Satterfield, 2011). These studies have provided important findings and recommendations for intercollegiate athletics and solidified phenomenology as an effective method for this study.

Sample/Participants

As of the 2024-25 academic year there were 134 member institutions in the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). Table 3.1 lists the 36 FBS institutions that announced a conference realignment decision during the three-year period between July 30th, 2021, and July 30th, 2024. Of these 36 decisions 25 realigned from one FBS conference to another FBS conference, five institutions who were FBS Independents joined an FBS conference, and six NCAA Division I FCS (Football

Championship Subdivision) institutions jumped to an FBS conference and joined a conference.

Each NCAA member institution has a FAR who serves as the liaison between the university and athletic department (NCAA FARA, 1998). Furthermore, FARs assist in the oversight of intercollegiate athletics by representing their university at the athletic conference and NCAA level. FARs at institutions that announced conference changes between 2021 and 2024 will be the population of this study. Prior research included a wide range of stakeholders and to my knowledge, there have been no studies on conference realignment from the perspective of faculty members or FARs as the sole participants.

TABLE 3.1 – 2021-2024 FBS Conference Realignment
Institutions that announced conference realignment decisions in FBS between 2021 and

University	Previous Conference	New Conference	Date of Announcement	Academic Year
Oklahoma	Big 12	SEC	7/30/2021	2024
Texas	Big 12	SEC	7/30/2021	2024
BYU	FBS Independent	Big 12	9/10/2021	2023
Central Florida	AAC	Big 12	9/10/2021	2023
Cincinnati	AAC	Big 12	9/10/2021	2023
Houston	AAC	Big 12	9/10/2021	2023
Charlotte	CUSA	AAC	10/21/2021	2023
Florida Atlantic	CUSA	AAC	10/21/2021	2023
North Texas	CUSA	AAC	10/21/2021	2023
Rice	CUSA	AAC	10/21/2021	2023
UAB	CUSA	AAC	10/21/2021	2023
UTSA	CUSA	AAC	10/21/2021	2023
Southern Miss	CUSA	Sun Belt	10/26/2021	2022
Old Dominion	CUSA	Sun Belt	10/27/2021	2022
Marshall	CUSA	Sun Belt	10/30/2021	2022
Liberty	FBS Independent	CUSA	11/5/2021	2023
New Mexico State	FBS Independent	CUSA	11/5/2021	2023
Jacksonville State	FCS (ASUN)	CUSA	11/5/2021	2023
Sam Houston	FCS (WAC)	CUSA	11/5/2021	2023
James Madison	FCS (CAA)	Sun Belt	11/6/2021	2022
UCLA	Pac-12	Big Ten	6/30/2022	2024

(continued)				
University	Previous Conference	New Conference	Date of Announcement	Academic Year
USC	Pac-12	Big Ten	6/30/2022	2024
Kennesaw State	FCS (ASUN)	CUSA	10/14/2022	2024
Colorado	Pac-12	Big 12	7/27/2023	2024
Oregon	Pac-12	Big Ten	8/4/2023	2024
Washington	Pac-12	Big Ten	8/4/2023	2024
Arizona	Pac-12	Big 12	8/4/2023	2024
Utah	Pac-12	Big 12	8/4/2023	2024
Arizona State	Pac-12	Big 12	8/4/2023	2024
Cal	Pac-12	ACC	9/1/2023	2024
Stanford	Pac-12	ACC	9/1/2023	2024
SMU	AAC	ACC	9/1/2023	2024
Army*	FBS Independent	AAC (FB only)	11/1/2023	2024
Delaware**	FCS (CAA)	CUSA	11/28/2023	2025
UMass**	FBS Independent	MAC	2/29/2024	2025
Missouri State**	FCS (MVFC)	CUSA	5/10/2024	2025
*Not part of the sample because they only changed conferences for football.				
**Not part of sample because the move will not occur until the 2025-26 academic year.				

Process & Analysis

The researcher’s process was derived from the methodology and phenomenological reduction approach (Moustakas, 1994, appendix C). This approach received approval from the committee through a dissertation proposal and the researcher – with oversight of a committee member as the Principal Investigator (PI) – then went through the Temple University IRB process to receive approval to conduct the following phenomenological research study.

The 32 FARs in the sample (Table 3.1) were identified through university and athletic department websites. The researcher compiled contact information from institutional websites and sent an email (Appendix A) to the institutional email address asking for participation in the study on perspectives of FARs and roles in the most recent round of conference realignment. If no response occurred, then the recipients received

follow up email(s) (Appendix B) asking for participation in the study. FARs in the sample that were non-responsive received five personalized emails. Four phone calls were made to FARs at institutions that realigned from the FCS to FBS to encourage participation from these four individuals in the sample.

A link to a general interest survey (Appendix C) was included in outreach to gauge interest, compile pertinent information on participants, and verify the FAR was eligible to participate based on their tenure in the position. For a FAR to be eligible for the study they must have been the FAR during the conference realignment decision, the transition to the new conference, and the beginning of membership in the new conference – in most cases these instances fell within the window of July 2021 to July 2024. The reason for this tenure is because it would mean the FAR was in the position when the conference realignment decision occurred, during the transitional period, and once the institution officially began membership in the new conference.

If any potential participant agreed to partake in the study and was the FAR during the required period, they received a follow-up email (Appendix D) to coordinate a Zoom interview. Once a date and time was identified a calendar invitation was sent to the participant which included the Zoom link, additional applicable information, Temple IRB Protocol Number, and the Research Consent Form as an attachment (Appendix E).

The goal was to obtain 12 participants from the sample size of 32 FARs for a 37.5% participation rate. The researcher obtained 13 willing participants with 12 of these participants fulfilling the time requirement as FAR and therefore included in the study sample (Table 3.2). Eleven of the 12 FARs in the sample became involved following email outreach with one being engaged via a phone call. The sample included each type

of potential FBS realignment decisions – Power Five to Power Five, Group of Five to Power Five, Group of Five to Group of Five, and FCS to FBS (Table 3.3). FARs in the sample were identified based on the type of conference move instead of the naming the conferences to ensure anonymity of participants. For instance, if there was a FAR at a Pac-12 institution that realigned to the ACC it would be much easier to guess who the participant was as compared to stating Power Five to Power Five.

TABLE 3.2 & 4.1 – Study Participants and The Conference Realignment Type
The 12 FARs in the study and their institutions conference membership change type, tenure in FAR role, and gender.

FAR	Old Conference	New Conference	FAR Since	Gender
Participant #1	Power Five	Power Five	2017	Male
Participant #2	Power Five	Power Five	2017	Male
Participant #3	Group of Five	Power Five	2021	Female
Participant #4	Group of Five	Group of Five	2019	Female
Participant #5	Group of Five	Power Five	2018	Male
Participant #6	Group of Five	Group of Five	2007	Male
Participant #7	Power Five	Power Five	2018	Male
Participant #8	Group of Five	Group of Five	2019	Male
Participant #9	Group of Five	Power Five	2019	Male
Participant #10	Group of Five	Group of Five	2019	Male
Participant #11	Group of Five	Power Five	1987	Male
Participant #12	FCS	Group of Five	2006	Male

TABLE 3.3 & 4.2 – Summary of Conference Realignment Type in the Study
Summary of the institutions that are represented by participants in the study.

Conference Realignment Type	FARs	Institution Type – Public or Private
Power Five to Power Five	Three (3)	One (1) Public & Two (2) Private
Group of Five to Power Five	Four (4)	Two (2) Public & Two (2) Private
Group of Five to Group of Five	Four (4)	Three (3) Public & One (1) Private
FCS to FBS (Group of Five)	One (1)	One (1) Public

Interview Protocol, Questions, and Pilot Support

Once an individual completed the general interest survey (Appendix C), the researcher followed up with an email that included the consent form and information on how to schedule an interview. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with FARs via Zoom that asked the same pre-determined questions (Appendix F).

Prior to the first interview the researcher reached out to two FARs and spoke with one who served as FAR at an institution during a conference membership change during the 3rd wave of modern conference realignment (2010-2013). This provided the researcher with feedback on the list of interview questions prior to beginning interviews from a FAR who experienced a conference realignment decision from a Group of Five to Power Five conference.

Each interview was conducted through a continuous Zoom meeting that averaged around 30 minutes in length. The Zoom method was effective and allowed the researcher to ask questions pertaining to the two research questions (Appendix F). At the beginning of the Zoom interview, the researcher asked for consent to record the interview for transcription purposes and explained that the participants name and institutional identifiers would be removed. After this confirmation, the researcher explained the two groups of questions – (1) the perspectives of the FAR during the decision process and everything prior to the public announcement of the conference realignment decision and (2) everything pertaining to conference realignment after the announcement of the change had been made in preparation for the transition and after membership in the new conference began. Both groups of questions included an open-ended question to ensure FARs the chance to share their views and experiences.

Data Analysis and Coding

After completion of the interviews, Zoom dictation software was used for initial transcriptions. The researcher then cross-referenced these transcripts with audio recordings of the interviews and made edits ensuring accuracy of transcripts. Confidential considerations were put into place for FARs by providing pseudonyms for names of the

participant and institution during the transcription process. After the completion of interview transcripts this study employed the six-step process for phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). This six-step process includes bracketing the topic (epoche), horizontalization, delimited meanings, invariant themes, individual textural description, and composite textural description (Moustakas, 1994, appendix C).

Phenomenological reduction propelled the researcher to generate findings through the six-step process. Beginning with bracketing or epoche, the researcher stepped away from biases to focus solely on the experiences of participants in the sample. Horizontalization occurred next by identifying significant statements throughout interview transcripts and holding these statements as equal to capture comprehensive views of participants which served as the building blocks for step three. Delimited horizons or meanings were used on this list to identify the most fundamental elements of the experiences of FARs through direct quotes that occurred in the interviews.

The fourth step – invariant qualities and themes – included thematic clustering to identify patterns in the experiences of participants. These themes are refined through a coding process to ensure they are nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping, and provide distinct insights from the interviews. Following this, the researcher conducted an individual textural description of what each participant experienced by creating tables to summarize findings. Finally, step six combined the findings from the individual textural descriptions into a composite textural description that allowed the researcher to answer research questions. Ultimately, direct quotes remained paramount in the explanation of the themes and findings that were identified through this analysis process. This six-step process allowed the researcher to use the theoretical framework of academic capitalism

(Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) to guide the analysis, theme development, and interpretation of participant perspectives.

Data Verification

Morse et al. (2002) provided five ways of verifying qualitative research that the researcher used to ensure accuracy in this study and in the methods used. First, methodological coherence occurred by conducting outreach and seeking feedback from FARs who served at institutions that went through the 3rd wave of modern conference realignment. Secondly, the sample was appropriate because FARs were able to answer interview questions that addressed the research questions. Third, the researcher collected and put the same weight on all interviews to ensure that findings were valid and align with horizontalization. Fourth, thinking theoretically was part of Moustakas' (1994) third and fourth step of phenomenological reduction by identifying essential meanings and thematic categories. Theory development through academic capitalism is identified as Morse et al. (2002) fifth verification strategy which the researcher employed through step six of phenomenological reduction by synthesizing findings and themes through the collective experience of participants. Data analysis and verification concluded with a comprehensive phenomenological account that captured both individual and collective experiences of FARs (Moustakas, 1994).

Positionality

The researcher is a full-time staff member at a Division I FBS institution. Researcher works regularly in conjunction with faculty and the faculty athletics representative. The institution is a member of a Group of Five conference that had three members announce their move to a power five conference in 2021 and the conference

subsequently backfilled with six member institutions from a different Group of Five conference. The researcher seeing first-hand the positive and negative impacts of conference realignment and having connections throughout athletics administration assisted in conducting this study.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The evolution of regional to national conferences, mass exodus from the Pac-12 Conference, and continued conference expansion has provided a cataclysmic shift in intercollegiate athletics. The modern era of conference realignment has led to research that has found impacts on athletic department financials (Yasser et al., 2011), historic rivalries (Havard & Eddy, 2013), carbon emissions (Hong et al., 2024), student-athlete wellbeing (Cleveland, 2022), and student-athlete performance (VanZant, 2024). For the substantial impact conference realignment decisions have on student-athlete wellbeing there has been little to no research on the involvement, roles, perspectives, and responsibilities of FARs in the conference realignment process.

FARs have self-identified their three key responsibilities as ensuring institutional control of the athletic department, maintaining academic integrity, and guarding the welfare of student-athletes (Munger, 2014) – all three of which pertain to conference realignment decisions. This study was able to identify the role – and lack thereof – that FARs have in conference realignment decisions and the role FARs do play to prepare student-athletes, faculty, and institutional stakeholders for an athletic conference change.

Interviews with FARs had two groups of questions to address the two research questions. The first grouping of questions explored the role of FARs in conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024 to be minimal and in most cases non-existent. Only one of 12 participants stated playing a role in the decision to leave one conference and join another. Five of the 12 participants were completely unaware of the change in

conference membership happening until the decision was announced publicly with one FAR finding out about the decision via X (formerly Twitter).

The second grouping of questions provided a wider range of findings with all 12 FARs stating they played a role in the transition to the new conference. The participants provided many examples of substantive support roles a FAR can have at an institution that announces a conference realignment decision in the future. Participants spoke about the importance of roles in the conference transition process such as communication with student-athletes, being proactive and assertive to play a role in preparation, collaboration with institutional stakeholders to change policies and processes to best align with the new conference, and supporting Olympic sport student-athletes who had unintended consequences from the conference realignment decision.

These themes and others derived from interviews on the experiences of FARs prior to the conference realignment decision public announcement and in the ensuing conference transition period. 12 of the 32 FARs in the sample (Table 3.2) participated in the study and are identified by transition type and demographics in Table 4.1.

TABLE 3.2 & 4.1 – Study Participants and The Conference Realignment Type				
The 12 FARs in the study and their institutions conference membership change type, tenure in FAR role, and gender.				
FAR	Old Conference	New Conference	FAR Since	Gender
Participant #1	Power Five	Power Five	2017	Male
Participant #2	Power Five	Power Five	2017	Male
Participant #3	Group of Five	Power Five	2021	Female
Participant #4	Group of Five	Group of Five	2019	Female
Participant #5	Group of Five	Power Five	2018	Male
Participant #6	Group of Five	Group of Five	2007	Male
Participant #7	Power Five	Power Five	2018	Male
Participant #8	Group of Five	Group of Five	2019	Male
Participant #9	Group of Five	Power Five	2019	Male
Participant #10	Group of Five	Group of Five	2019	Male
Participant #11	Group of Five	Power Five	1987	Male
Participant #12	FCS	Group of Five	2006	Male

The sample came from institutions with the following conference transitions; Power Five to Power Five (three), Group of Five to Power Five (four), Group of Five to Group of Five (four), and FCS to FBS/Group of Five (one). In total, there were seven FARs from public institutions and five FARs from private institutions (Table 4.2).

TABLE 3.3 & 4.2 – Summary of Conference Realignment Type in the Study		
Summary of the institutions that are represented by participants in the study.		
Conference Realignment Type	FARs	Institution Type – Public or Private
Power Five to Power Five	Three (3)	One (1) Public & Two (2) Private
Group of Five to Power Five	Four (4)	Two (2) Public & Two (2) Private
Group of Five to Group of Five	Four (4)	Three (3) Public & One (1) Private
FCS to FBS (Group of Five)	One (1)	One (1) Public

Research Question #1 Findings

FARs Play No Role in FBS Conference Realignment Decisions

In the first portion of the interview addressing research question #1, the majority – 11 of 12 participants – stated having no role in the decision to change conferences. The lone FAR who identified playing a role in the decision to change conferences was Participant #12. Participant #12 was the lone FAR from an institution transitioning from FCS to FBS and was involved from the beginning of the process when the institution conducted a feasibility study on potential realignment. The institution initially turned down the membership offer from the FBS conference due to “the academics, the travel implications for all our programs, and which programs would be offered by the new conference” (Participant #12).

Once the conference expanded with new members that were stronger peer institutions the university decided to make the move to the new conference and the FBS. This move was one that excited the FAR who pointed to the weight of academics and the role of the FAR:

I was very pleased that I was in direct communication both with the AD and the president, particularly on the academic implications of moving, and when they ultimately did decide to move forward, I think the academic component really held great weight. (Participant #12)

Participant #5 stated having a role in supporting the decision but was not part of the stakeholder group that made the actual decision to change conferences. Participant #5 stated this role derived from being proactive with the AD and president by offering support in their field of expertise – finance and consulting. They created financial proformas and comparative spreadsheets of the institution compared to other Group of Five and aspirant Power Five institutions. This data was provided to the AD and President’s Office for collateral information as the institution sought membership in a Power Five conference.

Only Participant #12 summarized having a role in the decision to change conferences at their institution. The other 11 participants stated their lack of a role in the decision (Table 4.3). A participant stated always being well informed by the Athletic Director on important decisions in the athletic department but not during this decision:

Directly no, that really happened behind the scenes in the AD’s office. I would say I’m generally well informed about things that happen in athletics...I feel generally well informed and consulted, but I wasn’t on this one. This really happened behind closed doors in the AD’s office. (Participant #8)

It was claimed throughout the interviews that important decisions such as conference realignment occur at a level FARs are not included in and at some points are even asked to leave the room when that decision was brought up. As Participant #1 noted:

The decisions are made at a level that you know that 99% of FARs are not a part of. There may be one unique FAR that had insight, but for the most part we’re the last to know and so, you know, just trying to connect on the relationships and focusing there rather than the dynamics. And what this means? Because I mean in my case, our previous conference was on life

support for a long time, like it was unclear who would survive the fistfight between our past conference and another Power Five Conference. So there were a lot of dynamics there to go into a meeting and again in that meeting be asked to step out for different things or not be included like, there's just a lot of dynamics going on there. (Participant #1)

Later in the interview, the participant reiterated that the FAR was not driving this decision and the focus of FARs in conference realignment should be on helping navigate the institution after a decision is made:

But I think a lot of this like I'm not gonna say you're sort of the bug on the window. But the FAR is certainly not driving this thing and so you know, as long as you're keeping the core principles about what we're supposed to be doing as you're navigating through this, I think that's probably the best that you're doing here. I just don't know that there were other kinds of things that you could really do to navigate this thing. It had momentum at a different level than the FAR operates at. (Participant #1)

Table 4.3 provides a summary of responses to interview question #1. These responses can be summarized by one of the 12 participants stating they played a role in the conference realignment decision.

Table 4.3 – Did the FAR Play a Role in the Conference Realignment Decision?		
Responses to Interview Question #1 – Do you feel you played a role in the decision-making process of leaving your previous conference and joining the new conference?		
Participant	Yes/No	Comments
Participant #1 (P5→P5)	No	“No, I'm gonna say that the decision was tightly, incredibly tightly controlled.”
Participant #2 (P5→P5)	No	“No, our institution never really made a decision to leave, we made a decision to survive.”
Participant #3 (G5→P5)	No	“Not a role in making the decision to leave at all. I don't think that I was part of that calculus as the FAR, but certainly in different ways in the transition to the new conference.”
Participant #4 (G5→G5)	No	“No, no. I think in our case it kind of happened suddenly”
Participant #5 (G5→P5)	No	“Do I know I played a role? Yes. Do I know how large a role? No.” (Participant later stated the found out about the conference change when it was announced publicly, therefore the FAR played no active role in the decision)

(continued)		
Participant	Yes/No	Comments
Participant #6 (G5→G5)	No	“I would just say that it's important that we stay in our lane as FAR and recognize there are some decisions that our role is to support it and help manage it as opposed to influence the direction of the decision. And I would leave it at that.”
Participant #7 (P5→P5)	No	No, I wouldn't say so. I was more informed about, prior to it being announced, I was informed about it. It's something that had been in the works and under tight wraps.
Participant #8 (G5→G5)	No	“Directly no, that really happened behind the scenes in the AD's office. I would say I'm generally well informed about things that happen in athletics and particularly in the AD's office. I feel generally well informed and consulted, but I wasn't on this one. This really happened behind closed doors in the AD's office.”
Participant #9 (G5→P5)	No	“Not one bit.”
Participant #10 (G5→G5)	No	“Not really, no not really.”
Participant #11 (G5→P5)	No	“Not really. That was above my pay grade for the most part.”
Participant #12 (FCS→FBS/G5)	Yes	“Absolutely! I was involved in the process very early on and throughout our decision making.”

Presidents, Athletic Director, and Trustees Make the Decisions

The lone participant who stated playing a role in the decision to change conferences ranked themselves as fourth out of five in terms of significance in the decision. When asked to rank individuals from most significant to least significant in the decision to change conference Participant #12 ranked the President, Athletic Director, and Board of Trustees ahead of themselves and only had more significance in the decision than Student-Athletes.

All 12 participants noted no role or miniscule in the conference realignment decision from the FAR. When asked to rank the Board of Trustees, President, Athletic Director, Faculty Athletics Representative, and Student-Athletes from most to least

significant role in conference realignment decisions, five FARs mentioned themselves as the least significant, four FARs mentioned themselves as the second least significant in front of only student-athletes, and three FARs left themselves out completely.

Not a single FAR claimed to have a more significant role in the decision to change conferences than the President, Athletic Director, or Board of Trustees. Four FARs claimed having more significance than student-athletes and five FARs claimed to have less significance than student-athletes (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 – Ranking the Significance of Role in Realignment Decisions					
Interview Question #5 (RQ #1) – From most significant (1) to least significant (5), can you rank the following individuals based on impact in the conference realignment decision? (Board of Trustees, President, Athletic Director, FAR, and Student-Athletes).					
	1	2	3	4	5
Participant #1 (P5→P5)	Athletic Director	President	Board of Trustees	Student-Athletes	FAR
Participant #2 (P5→P5)	Board of Trustees	President	Athletic Director	Student-Athletes	FAR
Participant #3 (G5→P5)	Board of Trustees	President	Athletic Director	-	-
Participant #4 (G5→G5)	Athletic Director	President	Board of Trustees	Student-Athletes	FAR
Participant #5 (G5→P5)	President	Board of Trustees	Athletic Director	FAR	Student-Athletes
Participant #6 (G5→G5)	President	Athletic Director	Board of Trustees	Student-Athletes	FAR
Participant #7 (P5→P5)	President	Athletic Director	Board of Trustees	FAR	Student-Athletes
Participant #8 (G5→G5)	President	Athletic Director	Board of Trustees	Student-Athletes	
Participant #9 (G5→P5)	President	VP for External	Athletic Director	-	-
Participant #10 (G5→G5)	Athletic Director	President	-	-	-
Participant #11 (G5→P5)	Board of Trustees	President	Athletic Director	FAR	Student-Athletes
Participant #12 (FCS→FBS/G5)	President	Athletic Director	Board of Trustees	FAR	Student-Athletes

For most significant influence in the decision-making process: six participants said President, three said Athletic Director, and three said Board of Trustees. Of the 12 participants, all 12 stated in their open-ended response that the President and Athletic Director played a role, while eight of the 12 mentioned Trustees. Participants #4 & #6 included Trustees in their rankings but were not sure if Trustees played a role with Participant #6 stating, “I assume but don't know this but I’m sure the Board of Trustees had some contribution, but you know, that’s above my pay grade.” Participants #9 and #10 did not believe Trustees played a role in the decision with one saying “I know that in this process there were only three people involved, the President, the Vice President for External, and the Athletic Director. That was it” (Participant #9).

Ultimately, FARs identified the President as having the most significant part in the decision of a university leaving one conference for another. Athletic Director’s were the second most significant and alongside President’s were the only stakeholders to play a role in all 12 conference realignment decisions. The third most important stakeholders in the decision were Trustees. After a steep drop off, Student-Athletes and FARs came in at fourth out of five most important in the decision-making process with three FARs leaving both student-athletes and themselves out of their ranking list entirely (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5 – Summary of Responses to Interview Question #5						
A summary of response to Interview Question #5 (RQ #1) and Table 4.4.						
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	Total Mentions
President	6	6	-	-	-	12
Athletic Director	3	4	5	-	-	12
Board of Trustees	3	1	6	-	-	10
Student-Athletes	-	-	-	5	4	9
FAR	-	-	-	4	5	9

Be Proactive - Battle to Demonstrate Value in Existence of a FAR

FARs stated the need to be proactive to have any semblance of role in a conference realignment decision. Being proactive and having substantive – potentially longstanding – relationships with institutional leaders were seen as pivotal in being granted a seat at the table or to have the ability to support those at the decision table.

Ultimately a comment by Participant #9 sums up the role of FARs in important decisions such as one to change conferences:

One of the things that you'll be picking up as you do these interviews, is faculty athletics representatives are very rarely invited to the decision-making table. In fact, one of the things that hit me immediately when I became FAR is that FARs as a group are constantly fighting a battle to demonstrate that there is value to their existence...Those decisions happen in separate rooms where I'm not there and I think most of the FARs would say the same thing. We're treated well by our universities, but our opinions are not really heard when it comes to these types of decisions. (Participant #9)

FARs stated the need to be proactive if they hope to play any role in significant athletic department decisions. Participant #5 proactively supported The Office of the President and the athletic director because of potential bandwidth issues that allow for preparation for conference realignment. Participant #5 employed expertise in finance and consulting by compiling comparisons of Group of Five peers and aspirant Power Five institutions and financial data on the benefits of a move to a Power Five conference. The compilation of this information was readily accessible to the president and AD when a potential move from the Group of Five to Power Five presented itself.

An additional pathway to being knowledgeable of important decisions prior to the announcement being made publicly derives from strong relationships and standing meetings with institutional leaders such as the AD. Participants #8 and #10 were

informed of the conference realignment decision by their AD prior to the public announcement. Table 4.6 shows when FARs found out about the conference realignment decision with five of the 12 finding out when the decision was announced publicly. Furthermore, three of the 12 claimed to play a role in the process prior to the public announcement with participant #2 stating the feeling that it was because the institution was trying to hide behind an academic veneer.

Table 4.6 – When FARs Became Aware of the Conference Realignment Decision	
Responses to Interview Question #2 (RQ #1) – At what stage of the decision-making process were you inundated with the information of the conference realignment decision?	
Participants	When they found out about the conference realignment decision:
#12	Beginning - Played a Role in the Decision
#2 & #7	Played a Role AFTER the Decision was made & before it became public.
#3, #8, #10, #11	Heard of the decision prior to the public announcement from the AD or during an institutional athletics leadership meeting
#1, #4, #5, #6, #9	Found out when the public found out

Participants #3 and #11 also found out prior to the public announcement due to standing meetings with the AD and institutional athletics leadership. Both leaders stated the importance of these meetings in staying up to date with athletic department happenings, with #11 doubling down on these meetings in a later response:

Well, yes I think for me, regular contact with the AD is a key. So we do a bi-weekly meeting which is key and then access to the president. I meet regularly with the president and our compliance people before each Board of Trustees meeting. So that happens quarterly and of course I have access to the president at any other time. Frankly he's a busy guy and I don't want to bother him unless I've got a really good reason to do so. But to answer your question, I would say regular access to the AD and to the president. (Participant #11)

Participant #2 and Participant #7 were also aware of the conference realignment decision prior to the public announcement although they did not play a role in the

decision. These participants stated playing important roles in the process after the decision to join the new conference had been made but prior to the public announcement. Interestingly, Participant #2 and Participant #7 were the only participants in the sample at institutions that were realigning conferences that would require regular coast to coast travel. Participant #2 sought input and perspectives from student-athletes on this potential cross-country conference change and found student-athletes were supportive due to the ability to continue competing at the highest level after their previous conference dissolved. Participant #7 was provided with the information of the conference move a few weeks before it went public to identify issues that needed to be addressed and to “prepare for the reaction on campus, particularly from faculty ... (and to identify) how it was going to be taken and preparing for that piece there” (Participant #7).

Being Left in the Dark Is Not Always Seen as a Negative

Not all FARs believed they should play a role in a significant decision such as a change in athletic conference membership because “it's important that we stay in our lane as FAR and recognize there are some decisions that our role is to support and help manage it as opposed to influence the direction of the decision” (Participant #6).

Participant #6 was not the only individual left in the dark on the conference realignment decision and not disgruntled to find out of the decision when the public did. The other four participants who found out with the public – #1, #4, #5, & #9 – all stated throughout the interview that the conference realignment decision at their institution was a good decision that faced minimal or no backlash. Participant #4 stated it was a positive due to better geography for conference peers, and the role of the FAR may have increased if the geography of the conference got worse instead of better. Participant #5 was fine

with hearing when the public did because the realignment to the Power Five was “the outcome we (the university) thought we needed to get.” Participant #6 and Participant #9 were fine hearing at the public announcement because their new conference retained historic rivalries, geographic ties, academic alignment, and regional travel so they did not see a problem with the decision.

A FAR who found out via X (formerly Twitter) and from an influx of text messages had no issues not being part of the process. This occurred due to the excitement the FAR saw from student-athletes due to the ability to compete for championships in an elite conference and the decision had other substantial benefits:

The other benefit to the student-athletes and why this resonated well here is it is still a regional conference. The idea of having to travel coast to coast for athletic events would not have gone over well. But we have less missed classes now, more of a kind of a regional experience than what you're seeing in some of the other realignment cases. So I think student-athletes were excited about that as well for what it's worth. (Participant #1)

Participant #6 was fine not being involved in the conference realignment decision because their perspective of the FAR position is that it is not one of making a decision like this, but one of managing the decision that is made. Once institutional leaders make a decision is when it becomes the FARs role to ensure student-athletes are supported:

Again, I reiterate what I said before about it's really not the decision of the FAR anyway. I think our role is more managing than in being part of the group that makes the decision. But making sure they know that we're there as a resource.

I also think it is an imperative but almost impossible task to continue to remind people that academics matter. So much of it now seems to be about chasing money and everything else is secondary, including natural rivalries, travel, schedules, and academics. I think it's imperative on us to keep reminding everyone involved that the degree is what we really want these kids to get, and that the vast majority of them are not going pro in their sport and it's really important to give them the skills and tools they'll need to be successful when they finish school or when they hang up their cleats.

I think it's a little bit easier for us mid major type schools where I think people are more realistic and most of our student-athletes understand that coming in. I just hope that if we just keep reiterating it to leadership. This isn't an implicit critique of my leadership, I think we're doing things right. But you know it's always the fear. (Participant #6)

FAR Involvement Grows as Potential Backlash to Decision Grows

The three participants in the study who had a role in the conference realignment process after the decision was made, but prior to the public announcement were Participants #2, #7, and #12. Participant #12 was the FAR at the institution that decided to complete a conference transition from the FCS to FBS. Participants #2 and #7 were the two participants in the study at institutions that were members of the Pac-12 Conference and realigned with conferences that required cross country travel for conference competitions.

Participant #12 stated the significance of the move, impact it can make on student-athletes, and the financial investment – exit penalty to the old conference, entrance fee to the new conference, salary increases for coaches, roster size increases, and a higher number of scholarships – of the decision to move to FBS as a reason for in depth analysis. Participant #12 stated some influence derived from strong institutional relationships and longstanding tenure as FAR and being on the hiring committees for institutional leaders such as president, AD, football, and men's basketball coach.

Participants #2 and #7 had shared experiences in that they were informed of the decision and asked to play a role prior to the public announcement. Participant #2 began having conversations with student-athletes and faculty to gauge their support and opinions on the potential conference decision prior to it being announced, "I was asked to

help in terms of gauging support, attitude, and feedback but in terms of how the decision was made. It was not my decision. I was not asked”.

Participant #7 was also informed of the decision weeks before it was publicly announced to begin preparations for potential backlash from campus constituents, especially faculty members:

(I was brought in during) some of the final stages, prior to the announcement, maybe weeks or so before. Where the decision had been made and it was about looking at the issues that needed to be addressed in both preparing for the move and preparing for the reaction on campus, particularly from faculty, and not so much in my space around the media and stuff, but certainly like how it was going to be taken and preparing for that piece there. So in the weeks leading up to it, being announced.
(Participant #7)

The remaining four FARs, became aware of the conference realignment within hours or days before the public announcement but had no bearing on the decision. These four participants attributed their awareness to having strong relationships with the AD or standing meetings with the institutional leaders such as the AD. Participant #11 was fine without having a say in the decision because they were kept informed throughout the process and not left in the dark. Additionally, Participant #11 stated lack of decision influence because the conference realignment decision was seen as a positive throughout campus. The move required a little more travel but nothing too different from a travel perspective and across campus support of the conference change:

(The conference realignment decision) hasn't been a controversial issue here at all. It's seen as a great sort of moment in our University's history to be in the (new conference) and to be aligned with a number of great universities, both private and public. Some incredible private and great public universities, so it's been easy to go with the flow. Even a lot of the faculty who tend to be negative about athletics have not really objected to this move. We think it's a step forward academically as well as athletically. (Participant #11)

Research question #1 and the sub question were answered through the first set of questions in interviews. The role that FARs played in conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024 was minimal to non-existent. Participant #12 was the only participant in the 12-person sample that identified as playing a part in the conference realignment decision and this FAR ranked themselves fourth out of five in terms of significance in the conference realignment decision. Another finding that pertains to this question is that for internal stakeholders the president plays the most significant role in the decision followed by AD.

No difference was identified in the significance of the role FARs played in the conference realignment process based on conference realignment type within the FBS – Power Five to Power Five, Group of Five to Power Five, or Group of Five to Group of Five. However, there was a much more significant and hands on role for two of the FARs that realigned from one Power Five to a different Power Five conference compared to another other Participant in the sample that realigned from one FBS conference to another. These two participants were the only FARs at institutions that vacated that realigned from a regional conference to a national conference – a move from the Pac-12 to a bi-coastal conference.

Participants #2 and #7 had similar experiences of being inundated once the decision was made and tasked with playing a role in the rollout of the conference realignment decision. Being tasked with gauging student-athlete and faculty feedback (Participant #2) and preparation for potential faculty backlash (Participant #7) served as responsibilities that no other FARs had in this process. One could derive that the roles of these two FARs were amplified because of the cross-country nature of the conference

realignment decision. Participant #7 shared their experience of being informed of the decision a few weeks before the announcement and asked to prepared for potential reactions from the decision:

Yeah in some of the final stages, prior to the announcement, maybe weeks or so before. Where the decision had been made and it was about looking at the issues that needed to be addressed in both preparing for the move and also preparing for the reaction on campus, particularly from faculty, and not so much in my space around the media and stuff, but certainly like how it was going to be taken and preparing for that piece there. So in the weeks leading up to it, being announced. (Participant #7)

The third and final FAR at a Power Five to Power Five institution played no role in the conference realignment process prior to the public announcement. In fact, this FAR became aware of the decision on X (Twitter) (Participant #1). The lack of role in the process after the decision, but prior to the public announcement substantiated that the regionality of a conference realignment decision impacts the role or – lack thereof – a FAR plays in the process. Participant #1 later stated “if we were going to be traveling coast to coast, that would have been a killer, so we didn’t have to manage that from a student-athlete well-being perspective” and it helped that there was support from student-athletes of the decision and no backlash because they remained in a regional conference:

And then I'll just say you know the one benefit – maybe I'm getting ahead in the questions – but the other benefit to the student-athletes and why this resonated well here is it is still a regional conference. The idea of having to travel coast to coast for athletic events would not have gone over well. But we have less missed classes and more of a kind of a regional experience than what you're seeing in some of the other realignment cases. So I think student-athletes were excited about that as well for what it's worth. (Participant #1)

This stance was corroborated by a FAR that witnessed a Group of Five to Group of Five transition. Twice in their interview this FAR stated the regionality of the new conference allowed for easy support and viewed the decision as a positive. The

participant stated a move to a national conference would have been ‘ridiculous’ and there is ‘no remote way that student-athlete welfare can be cited as having any role in that’:

I think our institution made the right decision in conference realignment; easily. I completely agree with them doing what they had to do, and I don't feel that they sold their soul to do it frankly, like some other schools did in my opinion. Going from one coast to another, ridiculous. It's ridiculous. There's just no remote way that student-athlete welfare can be cited as having any role in that. It's just ridiculous. So I don't think we did that here.

Like I said earlier, I think it was the right move. I think consequences by and large have been positive. The biggest thing that would have concerned me would have been travel impact and I just don't see that having been hugely impactful. A lot of our travel is still within a pretty narrow area. There is a lot of regional travel and frankly, there were a lot of schools that were not particularly close to us in the (old conference) I'm fine with it. (Participant #8)

Table 4.7 derived from responses to interview question #2 and summarizes FARs experiences about being informed of the conference realignment decision. Participants #12, #2, and #7 were the only participants that played a role in the realignment process prior to the public announcement. Coincidentally these FARs were at institutions that faced the most substantial transition in conference membership: Participant #12 (FCS to Group of Five FBS) and Participant #2 and #7 (P5 to P5) were the only participants to serve at institutions that vacated a regional conference and joined a national conference that requires west coast to east coast travel for conference competitions.

Table 4.7 – FARs Awareness of Conference Realignment Decision with Comments		
Responses to Interview Question #2 (RQ #1) – At what stage of the decision-making process were you inundated with the information of the realignment decision?		
RQ #1 IQ #2 – When did you find out about the conference realignment decision?		
Participant	Found Out	Comments
Participant #1 (P5→P5)	Public Announcement	“I looked at the Tweets like everybody else. I wish I could say I had an early heads up. But no, candidly, once it announced, my phone started blowing up, and I was like, I've got nothing. I have no idea. The work that I really was active in was after the decision.”

(continued)		
Participant	Found Out	Comments
Participant #2 (P5→P5)	Played a role after decision, but before the public announcement	“I probably knew a lot more than your average FAR about what was going on, and I was asked to help in terms of gauging support, on attitude and feedback, but in terms of how the decision was made. It was not my decision. I was not asked”
Participant #3 (G5→P5)	Heard from AD or Internal Meeting	“I think when it was an internally openly discussed as a possibility. You know, there was an open understanding of the reality, that this is something we were pursuing and then when it became increasingly likely that we were making this move.”
Participant #4 (G5→G5)	Public Announcement	“I went to the announcement. That's when I was first involved.”
Participant #5 (G5→P5)	Public Announcement	“I don't think I ever was. I don't recall athletics reaching out to me with information.”
Participant #6 (G5→G5)	Public Announcement	“When it went public, that was above my pay grade.”
Participant #7 (P5→P5)	Played a role after decision, but before the public announcement	“Yeah in some of the final stages, prior to the announcement, maybe weeks or so before. Where the decision had been made and it was about looking at the issues that needed to be addressed in both preparing for the move. Also preparing for the reaction on campus, particularly from faculty, and not so much in my space around the media and stuff, but certainly like how it was going to be taken and preparing for that piece there.”
Participant #8 (G5→G5)	Heard from AD or Internal Meeting	“It was just slightly before the public announcement, 24 or 48 hours before.”
Participant #9 (G5→P5)	Public Announcement	“I know that in this process there were only three people involved, the President, the Vice President for External, and the Athletic Director. That was it, I learned when it was announced.”
Participant #10 (G5→G5)	Heard from AD or Internal Meeting	“Our Athletic Director kept us apprised of what was going on, so we're very lucky.”
Participant #11 (G5→P5)	Heard from AD or Internal Meeting	“I found out before the public announcement. I have bi-weekly meetings with our Athletic Director and the chair of our Athletic Council. Our AD is really good about keeping me informed”
Participant #12 (FCS→G5)	Played a Role in the Decision	“At the stage where we hired a consultant to come in and look at the feasibility of moving to FBS and the (new conference).”

Research Question #2 Findings

FARs Provide Immense Support in Transition to New Conference

Research question #2 explored: How do FARs describe their role in supporting stakeholders – student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership – during a change in conference membership? FARs described their roles supporting internal stakeholders as much more significant in the conference transition period than they did in the decision to change conferences. All 12 participants stated involvement and identified many important roles to support student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership in the transition from the old conference to the new conference. This is a stark contrast to the one participant that stated playing a role in the decision to change conferences.

Many themes and responsibilities arose across interviews: streamlined communication and listening to student-athletes leads to the best support; FARs roles vary immensely from campus to campus; be proactive & assert yourself as FAR in order to be involved in important decisions; a larger responsibility for FARs in cross-country conference realignment; collaboration with various institutional stakeholders is a necessity; onboarding with the new conference & policy tweaking; awards & student-athlete recognition; and other findings that are important for FARs and institutional leaders to be aware of.

Streamlined Communication and Listening Leads to Best Support

Many participants stated communication being a key in the conference realignment process. Communication in the process was identified as a two-way street that required (1) FARs be in sync with institutional leadership – President, Athletic Director, Provost, Registrar, and athletic department executives (Senior Women

Administrator, Director of Compliance, etc...) – when communicating with student-athletes and (2) FARs listening to and seeking feedback from student-athletes and translating their voice to institutional leadership to support them in the transition. This two-way communication ensured that FARs were best supporting student-athletes on all fronts. First, FARs mentioned sharing the same message to student-athletes that they were receiving from institutional leaders and second listening allowed for the compilation of concerns of student-athletes which prepared FARs to advocate on student-athletes behalf, create policies to best support them, and substantive academic support alterations to assist in the transition.

Two participants summarized the importance of listening to student-athletes and sharing the same message with them that they are receiving from institutional and athletic department leadership:

Did a lot of listening, a lot of listening Austin, and a lot of counseling and coaching. You'd have segments of teams that would come talk about how this was going to impact them. I was very clear about messaging the same message that our AD and our SWA would message to them because I didn't want to create a tension. I wanted to make sure they understood from the very top – the AD to my role as FAR – we are here for them and we're going to do everything we can to make the transition work.
(Participant #10)

A second participant supported the need to listen and be in lockstep with institutional leadership. This participant went a step further and emphasized the reason they could do this so effectively was because the participant was part of the decision process:

And I think the important thing is that if the president's giving a message, the AD's giving a message, the FAR is giving a message. They all need to be the same message and if there's any disconnect in that, then there's real problems. So I think that's why it was crucial to have me on board early so

that we had our talking points organized and ready for all the different constituents involved. (Participant #12)

Participant #12 went further stating the need to meet student-athletes where they are to hear perspectives. This occurred by attending every Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) meeting, having office hours, and going to athletic facilities to meet student-athletes where they were to have informal conversations:

I went to every SAAC meeting number one. Those are the team captains, and a lot of those captains were bringing teammates because they realized I was a source of information so that they could see me there, they could hear the message that was delivered by the athletic director and by the president.

I did a lot of one-on-one meetings after that with individuals, whether they were Olympic sports or on the football team, they would come into my office. Sometimes I would go down to our athletic performing center and just sit around and talk in a room and just tried to make myself available to individuals so that they could hear the message. (Participant #12)

A handful of other participants stated the need to listen, learn, and effectively translate the student-athlete perspective to institutional leadership and conference peers. There was a translation process to hear perspectives from student-athletes and then translate these to decision makers. This FAR noted that the conference change was ultimately viewed as a positive but there was still a need to translate student-athlete voices:

Yeah, a lot of it was listening and then translating their voice into a collective voice and into the conversations I was in. So you know we were in a situation where it was moving to a positive rather than like getting kicked out (of a conference) or you know, sort of existential crisis kind of a thing. Our student-athletes were very excited. I think they felt pretty proud of the tradition we have here and how we were going to stack up in the new conference. They were very excited about it. I wasn't having to do anything other than listen and then make sure that I was representing those voices well in the conversations. (Participant #1)

A FAR stated the evolution that intercollegiate athletics was going through at the same time as the conference change was a reason the FAR needed to be proactive about communicating and assisting student-athletes in the conference transition:

In that year of transition there were student-athletes that had questions. It was a complicated time. Right? There were multiple dimensions of student impact topics happening in the same period and so the support student-athletes were seeking wasn't necessarily centered on moving into the (new conference) specifically.

For me it was more of a I'm gonna do the things that I do for student-athletes that weren't so focused on or specifically attentive to. 'Hey, we're moving into this new conference. What questions or what specific support do you need for that?'. (Participant #3)

FAR Roles Vary Immensely From Campus to Campus

FARs across the sample reiterated that the role of the FAR differentiates immensely across institutions. A FAR stated that one of their first observations was that no two universities are the same in relation to the role and responsibilities of the FAR (Participant #9). One participant stated that the FAR role is not only different at other institutions, but the role can see substantive differences based on who is the FAR and what kind of relationships they have with institutional leaders at the time. These internal changes can derive from relationships with institutional leadership, meaning a FAR that has better relationships across campus can be more effective and collaborate easier. Finally, two participants went even further claiming that FARs at lower resourced institutions play a larger role in athletics oversight and decisions such as one to change conference membership due to a lack of human capital to fulfill certain responsibilities.

When asked to provide advice to a FAR going through a conference transition a participant pointed to focusing on student-athlete academics and providing additional

support services where needed. The participant also mentioned how the FAR role can differentiate from one institution to another:

As you probably know the roles of the FAR on different campuses vary considerably. I would just reiterate regular contact with the athletic director and access to the president are key to being informed. You know it's creating a two-way information stream where you get informed and you also keep them informed if there are academic or faculty issues that are percolating. (Participant #11)

One participant pointed out the role of the FAR not only changes based on the institution but also based on the individual who is in the FAR position. This role can evolve due to relationships the FAR has across campus, potential skills or expertise the FAR has, and the responsibilities assigned to the FAR by the president or athletic director:

I would say that it's important to keep in mind that the positionality of every single FAR is different at different institutions. Even within my institution, my role as FAR is different compared to my predecessor's role as FAR. With leadership changes on campus, on the academic side, and also within the athletic department there have been changes in leadership which changes the presence of the FAR.

So yeah, just that the position of FAR is one of an evolving nature and the different nature of the FAR position at any particular institution is highly dependent upon those relationships with campus leaders in all those different spaces. And I think that's something to just be noted when thinking about this piece. (Participant #7)

Be Proactive & Assert Yourself as FAR in Order to be Involved

Being proactive and assertive were common themes in the first research question and reiterated multiple times during the second round of questions when FARs were asked to give advice to FARs at institutions that are in midst of a conference realignment decision or transition process. The general perception from FARs was the need to be proactive and assertive to prove your worth and be offered a seat at the table when important decisions are being made impacting student-athletes and the institution such as

a conference realignment. Participant #6 provided advice “open communication as much as possible with your athletic director and president. To let them know that you can be a resource for them through this process and to help ensure it proceeds smoothly.” One FAR summarized the importance of focusing on the academic, emotional, and social well-being of student-athletes, but noted that FARs can be viewed as a killjoy based on these priorities which leads to not having a seat at the decision table.

Another participant stated the need for FARs to be proactive to fill potential voids in human capital there might be in the President’s Office or athletic department. Additionally in other places in the interview, this FAR pointed to using their skillset to explain the financial benefits of a move to a Power Five conference to the president and being assertive in preparing the AD for meetings with a Power Five Commissioner in relation to membership:

I would encourage them to be as proactive as possible, because you never know how many resources your President's Office has or your AD has and making sure your president understands the value of those incremental media cash flows. (Participant #5)

When asked what advice a FAR would give to other FARs about to go through a conference membership transition the individual pointed to the need for assertiveness:

Assert yourself to be involved in as many conversations as you can because we do offer a different perspective at the table that isn't always immediately thought about. What is going to be the impact of this decision on the student? The athlete, who is a student compared to the student who is an athlete. Right? Most of it is pertaining to the athletic side compared to the student implications, so asserting yourself in that. (Participant #4)

A different FAR would recommend that FARs in the conference realignment process be supportive of athletic administrators who are overseeing the transition:

The second piece of advice is being really active and proactive as a FAR in dialogue with senior women's administrator, the head of athletics

compliance, and head of student-athlete academics because they're the ones who are really carrying water on making that transition in practice. I think as much as anything being an available, informed thought partner is critical because they're trying to calibrate on kind of the very core student success elements and they need somebody on their side to be a sounding board. (Participant #3)

A participant identified their process for playing a role in important athletic department initiatives that impact student-athletes by being an invisible hand that helps point everyone back to the true goal of supporting student-athletes:

The importance that FARs not only should have but should strive to have. Because, in my view, I try to operate like the invisible hand. Right? I don't want a lot of attention drawn to me. I just want to make sure that whatever issues that we have, we resolve them in ways that make us institutionally better. It's not about me. It's about our student-athletes. It's about the larger global operation of the institution. (Participant #10)

A participant summarized the importance of seeking a role and presence in the decision making room in order to ensure the well-being of student-athletes is a priority in the process. The individual also stated a caveat that FARs are a killjoy at times because of different priorities and that leads FARs to being left out of the decision:

My University would be happy for me to just sit in my office and never do anything as FAR other than go to the meetings I'm required to go to. But, I think we do have a role to play and one of the roles that FARs play that gets them in trouble and makes people not want to include us in decisions, but it's precisely the reason we should force ourselves into the decisions. It's our job to protect the best interest of the student-athletes and I don't mean financial fine... we're talking about like academic well-being. We're talking about emotional well-being. We're talking about social well-being ... I think this is the real role that FARs have to and must play, but it's also the reason that we get boxed out of rooms because we're the killjoy. (Participant #9)

A similar sentiment derived when a participant spoke about the need of FARs to do anything they can to find a seat at the decision-making table:

Yeah, probably just be really alert to governance and fight for FARs to have a role. It's going to vary at individual institutions, clearly. But

relative to conferences, we've got to have every little voice we can in anything and having some kind of seat at the table with the commissioner and with ADs. And again the ADs and presidents are the ones who are running it, but whatever little voice we can get in there, we have to.

You gotta know your place in the hierarchy of things and yeah, these are money decisions. Generally speaking nobody wants faculty much involved with money decisions. That's just how it is and it's not the fault of people at (my institution), that's just how it is. You just find your way to make contributions, even though there are going to be some things that are just out of your control. (Participant #8)

A Larger Responsibility for FARs in Cross-Country Realignment

FARs at institutions that vacated the Pac-12 and joined national conferences had a more substantive role in supporting in the aftermath of the decision. The FARs at these two institutions stated not only listening and translating, but also the need to compile data outside of these conversations on how the academic pursuits of student-athletes will be impacted by the conference realignment decision. This included compiling data on current missed class time and how the conference change would potentially impact this. Their role included being a liaison to different departments on campus to initiate substantive changes such as increasing the infrastructure for class recording software so student-athletes could watch lectures while traveling and assisting student-athletes in course registration to ensure classes that require in-person instruction such as labs would be taken during semesters that did not require travel for athletic competition. Additionally, the role of these FARs continued after the conference transition occurred with FAR #2 stating the focus now is continuing with student-athlete health and the impact of coast-to-coast travel for competition.

A FAR at an institution that now travels cross-country for conference competitions conducted the same listening process and compiled existing data on student-athlete travel and missed class time:

I went to talk to student-athletes, listen to them, and hear what they had to say. I took a look at the existing data in terms of baselines around; How much class were they already missing? What was travel like currently? What was their world like already?

After this, I made sure that institutionally and then at the conference level as soon as we started having conversations with the new conference that student-athlete voices were centered and that we were thinking about things from, you know as much as we could from their perspective. (Participant #7)

The other FAR at an institution realigning to a national conference claimed to have a substantial role when the previous conference had an exodus of members and needed to seek what was best for the university and student-athletes. The FAR began speaking to student-athletes about their perspectives of a move to a national conference and the consequences that this move would have on student-athletes. The FAR then led the creation of a committee of faculty and athletic department administration to address these issues and identify solutions needed to best support student-athletes in the conference transition:

I played a role in putting together a committee of primarily faculty, but also athletics administrators to sort of explore the issues and try to figure out solutions to increased travel time such as recording classes and other accommodations. As a result, there's a substantial document that was developed on how to deal with it that was driven by the academic side of the house by the FAR and that committee reported to the Provost who met regularly with the committee and made substantial resources available in order to mitigate the impacts of moving to the (new conference) and the impact being, you know, in terms of travel, missed class time, etc. That's when the FAR played a big role – a very big role. (Participant #2)

Although the athletic departments have made the transition to the new conference, the work in supporting student-athletes is ongoing. One participant stated the continued identification and evolution of academic and athletic support being offered to assist student-athletes with increased travel:

Now the focus, of course, is when you have to travel twice to the East Coast in 8 days to play football games and do 5,000 miles (two times). What are you going to do? Take care of your body. What are you going to do to take care of your sleep and things like that as well. So those are the real issues they're dealing with now in real time. But there was nothing really they could do to prep that for that part. (Participant #2)

Collaboration with Various Institutional Stakeholders a Necessity

The ability to effectively serve student-athletes in the transition from one conference to another was heavily assisted by strong relationships with institutional stakeholders. Collaborations occurred with institutional leadership such as trustees, president, provost, athletic director, and faculty, but the true substance to changes occurred in conjunction with staff and offices such as the registrar, admissions, senior women's administrator, compliance, and student-athlete academic support.

Participant #2 stated collaboration between faculty, athletics staff, and institutional leaders such as the university registrar was required for a successful conference transition:

The people who really had to do something were talking to the registrar and people like that about how to change things and increase the infrastructure available to record classes to make them available and things like that so the prep to support student-athletes was mostly on the academic and athletic academic administration side. (Participant #2)

A fellow participant pointed to working with student-athlete academic support staff to find burdens that arise in a conference transition. If increased burdens cannot be solved within the AD's office, then loop in the president's office to try and find additional support:

I would say, you know, work with your AD and the academic support people to see what additional burdens the conference realignment is going to put on student-athletes and make sure that you have the resources to handle that. Our academic support people do a really great job and we bolstered that department in recent years by creating more positions. And

then, you know, let your president know if there are real concerns on the academic side for supporting the student-athletes. (Participant #11)

Five participants in the study mentioned working alongside the SWA in the athletic department in their role in the process. One participant stated a proactive approach to working with the SWA, compliance staff, and student-athlete academic services to best support student-athletes in the conference transition:

The second piece of advice is being really active and proactive as a FAR in dialogue with senior women's administrator, the head of athletics compliance, and head of student-athlete academics because they're the ones who are really carrying water on making that transition in practice. I think as much as anything being an available, informed thought partner is critical because they're trying to calibrate on kind of the very core student success elements and they need somebody on their side to be a sounding board. (Participant #3)

Four participants pointed to collaboration with the provost as important and two of these individuals initiated changes in university academic and admission policies in conjunction with the provost to assist in the conference realignment process.

Academic policies have changed because of our movement up to FBS. For a number of years, I've been arguing that we should have priority registration for our student-athletes to minimize missed class time. True priority registration was operationalized by our registrar's office. I finally was able to (have the change made) with the conference move and the support of the AD and the president to go to the Board of Visitors and looked for an opening, and when the individual said, 'Hey, we're a brand new board. How can we help you?' I walked through that door and I said two things, true priority registration and the other thing I wanted to implement is an excused absence policy.

We crafted an excused absence policy that applies to any student representing our institution off campus at a university sponsored activity. So band members, debate team, drama groups, as well as student-athletes. We've had some pushback ... but it works out very nice for that and really has helped and I think the students have really appreciated it. (Participant #12)

The second FAR that pointed to collaboration with the provost to change institutional policies stated the need to do this to 'level the playing field' when joining the

new conference. Changes to academic policies, course registration process, streamlining of the transfer admissions process, and creation of new graduate programs were all changes to address issues student-athletes were having in the period of the change in conferences:

Our institution, does not take many transfers and it can be a brutal process here. How could we make that a little bit easier and more competitive? So I talked with the provost and the president to start the process and ideation and with the dean of admissions as well. That was really important you know. Could we do more? Some midyear transfers, for example, which we never used to do before. So we started piloting some programs as well to try and be more supportive of the coaches, you know, and recruiting players at the same time as this all happening.

There were all kinds of initiatives that we were actively trying to do in order to make, let's say, to level the playing field a little bit for our teams. The move to the (new conference) coinciding with this very intense transfer portal and our need to be able to compete. There was a confluence of all of that coming together. And so we played a pretty strong role, a very strong role in all of that. And that's going to you know, ultimately go to the Committee on Graduate Studies to be blessed and working with them and stuff like that to get it approved. (Participant #2)

A final participant pointed to joining the 'core planning group' once the institution announced the conference realignment decision. The FAR was able to ensure the institution remained committed to the three pillars of the role FARs should play that helped mitigate any negative impacts on student-athletes:

Yeah, I'd say, then I jumped into the core planning group. And again, the way that I think about the FAR role is it's focused around (1) institutional control, (2) student-athlete wellbeing, and (3) academic integrity.

Those three pillars were my role to make sure that we're in a good spot with those three areas as we began thinking about the transition in conferences. What does this mean for a student-athlete? Academically, you know, if we were going to be traveling coast to coast, that would have been a killer, so we didn't have to manage that from a student well-being perspective. It was good to sort of learn in the new conference the ways in which they think about that element, from mental health to sports science to all of the dimensions on that and just making sure that we're getting the best of that information applied to our organization.

So yeah, I would say, once it was public, then jumped into that core planning group to think about the transition, the timeline trying to

mitigate any negative impact on student-athletes and maximize whatever the new conference has to offer. (Participant #1)

Onboarding With the New Conference and Policy Tweaking

Multiple FARs in the study mentioned the responsibility of proper onboarding with the new conference which included alterations to university policies, protocols, and operating procedures. Substantive examples of this in practice ranged from one FAR stating the importance of reading the conference manual to another that mentioned analyzing the governance structure of the conference, and others that emphasized the importance of working with campus colleagues to update institutional procedures to what is needed with the new conference.

A participant stated their number one piece of advice to other FARs entering the conference realignment process is to read their new conference manual. This process will be informative for the FAR and also help the FAR identify ways to get involved in governance of the conference:

My number one piece of advice would be to read the conference handbook. I didn't even think to do that and then a year and a half into my role the FARs in an attempt to prove ourselves helpful to the conference decided it was going to be our job to revisit the conference handbook with all this turnover. I just realized, all of the important rules and stuff are in the Conference handbook, and I should have just read the dang thing cover to cover at the beginning. It's not that long, it's like 60 pages. Yeah, that would be my first thing. So go read your conference handbook, it will tell you a lot. (Participant #9)

In the conference manual, a FAR will find policies on the governance structure of the conference. A participant mentioned the need to do this to find ways to have a voice in decisions and conference leadership:

When you go to a new conference, look at the governance structure and see if there's any role for FARs and if not, make as much noise as you can

get away with. But, if you make too much noise then they'll just replace you because we all serve at the pleasure of the president. (Participant #8)

Multiple participants stated the need for alterations to university protocols and athletic department operations to be in sync with the new conference. Participant #3 stated an important role in the conference transition was working with the director of compliance to recalibrate compliance strategies because of different requirements in the new conference. Ultimately, FARs identified a more hands on approach in this realm of the conference realignment process:

The transition to the new conference was a much more hands-on significant role in helping to develop policies and plans for making the move for the institution. It also included working with the new conference to you know adjust its policies and procedures to incorporate all of the new members. (Participant #8)

Awards and Student-Athlete Recognition

Two participants who stated having no impact on the decision to change conferences and minimal impact during the transition pointed to student-athlete awards and scholarship opportunities as an area of support. Multiple times in the interview with these two FARs they stated their only substantive role in the conference realignment process was in identifying student-athlete opportunities for awards, research, and postgraduate scholarships. In both cases the participants pointed out that the new conference had opportunities for student-athletes to be recognized and involved such as awards and an academic research symposium.

A participant reiterated not having a substantial role in the process, but pointed to being proactive and focusing on student-athlete wellbeing in a multitude of ways such as academics and provided an example:

I mean, there's a part of me that wants to say I didn't at all, but I guess there was some minor support. For instance, I did help a student-athlete get a postgraduate scholarship, but I don't know if I would call that transition because that's just part of the job. As we were moving into the (new conference) there are a lot more awards and scholarships available to student-athletes than in the (previous conference) and I do help with that stuff. That would be the main area where I help. (Participant #9)

Participant #8 went further to note that the previous conference had an academic honor role but the new one did not. The participant created an award so student-athletes could still be recognized and have additional pieces of information for the resume:

The (old conference) had an honor roll and it was pretty easy, it was a 3.3 or something and you were an honors student-athlete and it was always nice CV patter. So when that went away with the new conference we instituted a FARs honor roll, I think we made it 3.5 to kind of take the place of that as a resume builder. I think that was the main thing related to realignment that I did. (Participant #8)

Other Findings

Through interviews there were other themes and findings identified outside of the realm of the research questions. These are important to make note of due to the impact on FARs, student-athletes, and higher education institutions. They include conference realignment such as unintended consequences to some sports, external parties driving conference realignment, and the importance of financial increases. There was also the identification of themes that pertain to the FAR position including the lack of defined responsibilities of the position, the diminished role of the FAR if their athletic department is properly resourced, and the continued decline of the oversight of FARs in leadership of intercollegiate athletics.

Unintended Consequences of Realignment & Student-Athletes Impacted Differently

It was noted by multiple participants that athletic programs are impacted differently in the conference realignment process. It is not atypical for a new conference

to not offer a sport and therefore an athletic program may be forced to become an independent until they are able to find a different conference for competition. Finally, a participant pointed out that there was a circumstance where an athletic program was already mainly competing on the opposite coast, so this athletic program on their campus was not impacted by the conference realignment decision and served as a model during the process of how to deal with cross-country competition. Ultimately there are unintended consequences in the conference realignment process that have real impacts on student-athlete success that require FARs to step in and play a supporting role. These unique circumstances provided substantive examples of how institutions dealt with conference realignment transitions.

One participant stated the need to treat the conference realignment process differently for each athletic program. The institution looked at every athletic program and identified the programs that would be impacted the most. Furthermore, there will be athletic programs at some institutions such as water polo that will not be impacted by a move from the Pac-12 to Big Ten or ACC. This allowed the FAR and institutional leaders to have a target group of student-athletes to ensure help to those impacted the most:

One thing to remember is that not all of our programs transitioned to the new conference and one of our programs was already playing predominately on the east coast so you know, just leaning on them and their experience to try and figure out what was going on.

We also tried to do sort of a triage, and instead of treating all 36 sports the same, we said which sports are likely to be the most affected and then we pinpointed those 6 or 8 sports the most. Then based on that, we looked at the majors that the students were taking and the kinds of classes that student-athletes were most heavily populated in and sort of then by triage, started focusing slowly but surely about where we should concentrate my efforts (as the FAR) and resources in order to accommodate. (Participant #2)

After leaving a conference and joining another, one institution had three athletic programs forced to go independent after joining a conference that did not sponsor any of those sports:

Also, field hockey and lacrosse had to schedule independent for two years I think, before we found them a conference, and that was very much a time. I spent a lot of time with student-athletes, experiencing that, trying to explain the decision-making and having them understand what was going on. ... And what I don't think alumni or the public really thought about is the implication for the other sports in these moves. Because you want to reassure the sports that we're not in any way going to siphon off funds from our Olympic sports to fund this move to the FBS. (Participant #12)

This participant stated later in the interview that the only issues they have had since the conference change has been in finding conferences for these three programs to compete in. The realignment decision has forced these three programs to go independent or in one case change conferences twice already since the conference realignment decision:

The only problems we've had is with the sports that the (new conference) doesn't sponsor. They've had some difficulties. Our swim team has been in at least 2 different conferences. Our field hockey went independent for 2 years before they found a conference and that was that was tough. If it was a perfect world, I'd love all my sports to be in the same conference. (Participant #12)

One FAR mentioned that the conference realignment decision was in many ways a positive but there were negative consequences that impacted student-athletes. From the perspective of a FAR, the process was not always centered on student success as it should have been, such as coaches dismissing student-athletes due to the increase in athletic skillset needed for student-athletes to succeed in competition in the new conference:

As a faculty member who sees the mission of the institution as a whole (sometimes it wasn't) really centered on student success as it maybe should have been...in the last several years such as student-athletes being dismissed or released from scholarship because of our approach to

scholarships...different expectations in a different conference about how scholarships are awarded.

But all to say that I think that's a space if I were giving recommendations to a FAR specifically at an institution in transition I would offer the suggestion based on what I saw with students and what I saw specifically with a very small but real subset of sports, and how they responded to the transition at the leadership level, specifically at the president and Board of Trustees level. Very clear, proactive articulation about how this transition shows up and the way people engage in their work. Yeah, we all want to win. Right? You know, that's just the nature of the world, right? But at what cost is the part that I'm not totally sure we had a discussion on or balance with what I would encourage, because there really have been some unintended negative consequences. Not many, but enough that I would surface that. (Participant #3)

One participant mentioned student-athletes being left out of the decision process completely and being impacted immensely due to these decisions:

I think student-athletes often are just left out. It's just like we made a decision for you. We're flying coast to coast. We don't care what you think, and I think FARs can be a bigger voice for student-athletes, because I think we hear, we listen, and we appreciate what they're going through sometimes not more than the coach or the AD. But sometimes we think of differently. I just hate that we've incorporated college athletics to the point of it's all about the money and the TV. And if you happen to be on the volleyball team or the crew team. Hey, you're part of the tail that gets wagged! (Participant #10)

Influence of External Parties Drives Conference Realignment

No questions were asked in relation to the role of external parties – conference commissioners, politicians, donors, and television network executives – play in the conference realignment decision or transition process yet each of these parties were brought up by participants. Different participants identified various political stakeholders at the local, state, and federal level that played roles in the conference realignment decision. Ultimately this was outside of the scope of the research and interview questions, but it serves as an important reminder of the external influences in the conference realignment decision and transition process.

One participant concluded the open-ended question that ended the first group of questions with a strong claim that external stakeholders of television networks/media companies are what drives the modern era of conference realignment:

The forces that are in play here (in conference realignment) are just way beyond any one school or set of individuals. It's clearly the media and television with those that's the big influence and that is what drives things. (Participant #2)

This participant went on to reiterate the role that television networks/media executives play in the conference realignment process. These networks determine the monetary payouts to conferences and through this hold incredible power in conference membership:

I wouldn't say there's a president that goes out looking for this stuff because they got other things to worry about. But if a media executive starts talking to an AD and explains to them how they could be a lot better off in a different conference, that becomes quite a force, and I suspect that's where a lot of this starts. You know, the media are the ones ultimately, they're going to make the big decision. They'll decide, you know what your rights are gonna be and so they're incredibly powerful. ADs are also powerful. The ADs (in a different Power Five conference) are the ones I believe that blocked our institution from joining the conference. (Participant #2)

Multiple participants also mentioned the role of political figures in the conference realignment process. This influence included a Governor appointing members to an institutions Board of Trustees (Participant #1), a long serving politician at the federal level ensured one institution received approval to join the new conference by lobbying conference officials and leaders at institutions in the new conference (Participant #2), a different Governor was identified as the 'third rail' in the process (Participant #3):

Yeah, I mean, at least in (our state), there's a third rail which is the Governor. For many reasons the role the Governor played was very behind the scenes and it is not always in alignment with what a particular institution would prefer. But that is certainly an additional point of influence. (Participant #3)

Importance of Financial Increases and Becoming Peers with Aspirant Peers

The focus of the study was on the role of FARs in the decision to change conferences and in the ensuing conference transition period. Due to this, no interview questions were asked pertaining to external parties or to the reason why conference realignment decisions occurred. However, during interviews multiple FARs made claims that institutions were seeking increased revenues from conference realignment decisions, media networks drive conference realignment because of the financial investments in broadcasting rights, and to get faculty on board to approve conference realignment a FAR shared financial investments in research from the conference and academic prestige of new peer member institutions to help address backlash.

A participant identified financial reasons and external impacts from media networks as the driving forces of a mass exodus from their former Power Five Conference. The participant pointed to the desire of the first institution to leave the former conference occurred because the institution felt it was not being properly valued in a media deal. A second institution followed suit due to the need to increase revenues as they had a significant financial problem and budget shortfall. The third and fourth defectors mentioned were emphasized to have been driven out due to substantial influence that media networks have on conference realignment:

You know clearly (previous conference peer institution #1) was always looking to leave because they were unhappy with the media deal. They thought they were carrying the load for the conference in terms of media rights because of their market. I don't think (previous conference peer institution #2), to be honest with you was really looking to leave, but they had a serious financial problem. So yeah, it's you know. It's sad, you know, that it comes down to one or two schools.

I don't think (previous conference peer institution #3 or previous conference peer institution #4) would have pursued realignment if it

weren't for the first movers and if the cracks hadn't already been there. I don't know, maybe they would have, but the forces that are in play here are just way beyond any one school or set of individuals. It's clearly the media and television that's the big influence and that is what drives things. (Participant #2)

One participant stated the need to be proactive in providing support to their president and Athletic Director in preparation for joining a Power Five conference. They stated a substantial role as compiling information and identifying the importance of a move to the Power Five such as explaining to the president that the present value of incremental cash flows would be equivalent to the university closing a 500-million-dollar donation:

I would encourage FARs to be as proactive as possible, because you never know how many resources your President's Office or your athletic director has. I made sure our president understood the value of incremental media cash flows. I kept telling my president that the increase in annual media payouts, if you look at the present value of that cash flow stream in perpetuity. That's like getting a 500-million-dollar gift today, which would be by far the largest gift the university has ever received. So it is important to take this seriously. And I would say, to encourage if the FAR isn't the person to collect data and make a case to encourage the president and AD that those would be resources well spent to get prepared in that way. (Participant #5)

Alignment with new peer institutions that match an institutions academic profile (Participant #12) or were once aspirational peers (Participant #10) were identified as important in the conference realignment process. This participant went further stating it was easy to gain faculty support of the conference change because they saw it as a win due to higher revenues, wider visibility, strengthened institutional profile, and the ability to attract quality students. This FAR summarized the institutions move later as 'lucky' and the quality of peer conference members increasing made the decision and selling of the decision easy because 'we moved into a better neighborhood':

I think they saw it as a win, so it was fairly easy. I think they saw revenue streams. I think they saw it was a step up for us with more visibility and a higher profile. What that meant for faculty? Maybe you're going to get a higher profile student because we would get more people applying to our university because we're now moving up in a conference. So that was a benefit. There's more competition for getting those quality players. So maybe we're getting the quality students as well. (Participant #10)

One FAR that faced more faculty backlash to the conference realignment decision than any institution except one of the shared benefits that the new conference would offer to faculty when speaking about the conference change. Deploying this information on the academic consortia and research investments the new conference provides was important in changing the discourse of faculty members. Coordination of a campus visit from the new conferences academic alliance allowed the conference to share:

What it meant to be a part of the (new conference) and to understand those relationships, opportunities, networks, consortia, and all of those types of things. We really sort of laid that piece out, including the fact that, believe it or not (prestigious institution) is actually a member of the conference. They left the conference for athletics but maintained the affiliation with the conference and particularly the academic alliance. So laying that out to faculty to provide an understanding of what the academic alliance does, this mostly athletic entity has a very strong academic presence and we were now going to get to be a part of that. And we laid out what did that mean in terms of courses, consortia, and opportunities for research and funding? And the way in which everything, from admissions to housing and student affairs, and all these things were brought into that (new conference) family. (Participant #7)

Lack of Defined Responsibilities for FARs

A reason provided for the immense disparity in the impact and responsibilities of FARs from one institution to another was because the role is not properly defined. The NCAA and each conference have a “nebulous job description” that does not create a uniform leadership role for FARs. Due to this, it becomes the responsibility of a FAR to define their role and provide value to their institution:

One of my general observations is no two universities are the same. One of the things I didn't understand as a FAR is the NCAA has kind of this nebulous job description and every conference also has this kind of nebulous job description. But I actually think it's on the shoulders of the FAR to define their role and how to add value at the University. My University, I think, would be happy for me to just sit in my office and never do anything as FAR other than go to the meetings I'm required to go to.

But, I think we do have a role to play and one of the roles that FARs play that gets them in trouble and makes people not want to include us in decisions, but it's precisely the reason we should force ourselves into the decisions. It's our job to protect the best interest of the student-athletes and I don't mean financial. But we're talking about academic well-being. We're talking about emotional well-being. We're talking about social well-being. (Participant #9)

Diminished Role of FAR When an Athletic Department is Properly Resourced

Two FARs attributed the varying role of the FAR across higher education institutions, but attributed these differences to resource discrepancies of athletic departments. These individuals stated a lack of responsibility in the conference realignment process due to working at institutions with well-resourced athletic departments stating significant financial support, human capital, and skill of staff as examples of their well-resourced athletic departments.

A participant went in-depth on their belief that FARs are only at the decision table and provided substantive responsibilities if they are at under-resourced institutions:

FARs are very rarely invited to the decision-making table. In fact, one of the things that hit me immediately when I became FAR is that FARs as a group are constantly fighting a battle to demonstrate that there is value to their existence. I get the sense for most universities – not all, there are a couple universities in our conference that I think are unique, but I think the reason they're unique is because they're under resourced to be honest with you – the universities that have well-resourced athletics departments I think mostly view their FARs as something of a necessary evil that is required by the NCAA. It's required to be a part of the governance structure, but well-resourced institutions don't think these people have a lot of value to add in the decision-making process and for the most part I think, we feel largely boxed out from the big decisions. (Participant #9)

Later in the interview doubled down that the level of financial resources and staffing is a reason they were not involved in the conference realignment decision and had a very miniscule role in the transition process:

I do want to reiterate part of why I think my role is so minimal on campus is because we're very well resourced. I know colleagues at other (new conference) schools where the FAR basically serves the role of an associate AD, but here we have three associate ADs and a bunch of assistant ADs. At some schools in our conference where the athletic departments have worse budget situations they're not going to go hire extra associate ADs, they're just going to ask the faculty athletics representative to kind of play that role and I think less resources are what drives that. (Participant #9)

A different FAR pointed to lack of input in the process at their institution not only because of fiscal investment, but also the competence and expertise of athletic department staff.

I don't know that I played much of a role (in supporting student-athletes during the conference membership change process). As you probably know, from talking to FARs, the way a FAR gets involved varies a lot from campus to campus and depends greatly on the number, the competence, and the expertise of staff members in athletics. So yeah, I don't know that I really had much interaction with the student-athletes on that topic. (Participant #5)

The qualitative study allowed these individuals to speak about their experiences and provide important information to FARs who are at an institution going through a transformational decision such as a change in conference membership. These findings provide a different lens for FARs to look through when changes arise.

The Lack of a 'North Star' & The Decline of the Impact of FARs

A general sense of unease and disgruntlement was found throughout the interviews. This was explained through two themes that arose in interviews – (1) the lack

of vision, leadership, or a 'north star' in intercollegiate athletics today and (2) the decline of the role that FARs play in intercollegiate athletics leadership.

A FAR stated they were sad due to the current state of intercollegiate athletics and the arrival to this point due to college athletics leaders not being proactive about being equitable in revenue sharing or evolving in other ways. The FAR went on to state that the impact FARs have on college athletics today has diminished and many times the FAR is only brought out when it is convenient and an academic veneer is needed:

I think it's sad that this great collegiate athletic model is now where it is. If we had taken the time years ago to be more equitable and fair, and not be so nuts about how we treated student-athletes, then maybe they wouldn't have been radicalized to the point where NIL became what it is. Who knows? There were so many mistakes made along the line that if there were people who were sharing more (revenue) along the way, I don't think we would have killed the golden goose. I hate to end this way, but I just fear for the future of collegiate athletics which to me is still important, as the Olympics proves time and time again. Not only are we training USA athletes, but we're training the world's athletes in many sports and we will see what happens now.

I think the FARs role has been weakened. FARs are used when it's convenient to hide behind a sort of academic veneer. But ultimately, you know, my experience is that the FARs are not utilized enough. For example, we asked for a direct role in the hiring of the commissioner of our old conference. We were told that the process was too confidential for a FAR to be on it and that they didn't trust us. They said they're gonna keep it a small, tight group because we couldn't keep it in confidence, but they were talking to FARs who have all served on search committees that were super confidential over the years. That to me was the low point, you know we were shocked.

I just I don't know where it's all gonna go, Austin, but these are the regrets that I have that we couldn't have been a stronger presence in making the decisions, because maybe we would have seen things a little differently, and not made the mistakes that were made. (Participant #2)

The NCAA was identified as a catalyst for conference realignment due to the lack of providing a north star or guiding light to member institutions:

I don't think the NCAA has been a great guiding light, and I think that is probably causing some of the conference breakups and realignment,

because people are trying to say, well, if I don't have a clear north star there, I've got to chart my own way, and here's what I see is the best maybe short, mid, and long term. I think there's some consequences there and then just the other legal issues that are kind of swirling around college athletics are something that's making it incredibly difficult for students to get that extraordinary academic and athletic experience that we're all trying to bring to student-athletes. (Participant #1)

A lack of north compass during a transformational point in intercollegiate athletics history was identified as a difficult hurdle for FARs to work under during a conference realignment decision. The FAR pointed to this lack of clarity in vision as something to be clarified in order to effectively serve student-athletes:

I know 100% that I'm not alone on thinking this, but college athletics especially, DI college athletics is at such a messy point of inflection. That I'm not actually sure we have a good or clear north compass from my perspective. I think at this point we don't understand how to really support the student and the athlete who is the same person because the athletic side has become so disrupted. In a situation where the student side has largely stayed stable and that for me, is the single biggest thing that we have to be about getting right, because the tragedy of all of the very student-athlete centered in most cases decisions that have been made right may have the unintended negative consequences of also being really potentially damaging to those same students. (Participant #3)

A participant stated that college athletics has lost the collegiate model because institutions have lost sight of why student-athletes come to college and that is to get an education for life, skills, and opportunities for the future. The FAR stated that this will continue to occur until FARs become more influential as a group in conference governance:

Yeah, I don't feel as a group, the FARs could have done much more, which is sad. And I'll add this, it is an editorial add-on, but I think it's one of the reasons why we sort of lost sight of what the collegiate model is and how important it is. You know, I think it's great that universities want to compete at the highest level in athletics and I support that fully, but we should never lose sight about fundamentally why you're coming to a university. That's to get an education for life and lifelong skills and opportunities. And I think we're selling a lot of students short, we're just

using them. They're benefiting, sure, financially in the short term. But I'm not sure we're really doing right by them.

So until FARs become more influential as a group within the conferences. I don't see that changing, because there's no one who is going to advocate for that. I mean the presidents should care about it, and they do. I won't say they don't, but they also have fiduciary responsibilities right. Who fundamentally cares most about the academics? It's the FARs, and they're not present in these (conference realignment) decision discussions. (Participant #2)

One FAR pointed to substantial changes in intercollegiate athletics such as conference realignment because of the decline in role of FARs in NCAA governance:

I think you could make an argument that the whole business and I mean this everywhere, not just here is fairly indicative of ultimately the FAR relative to NCAA decision making. At this point, whenever a major decision is happening it means a money decision is happening. FARs are not playing significant roles when money is concerned. We just aren't the people they're gonna go to. Yeah, I think it stands for sort of where a lot of that is and it is what it is. I don't blame individuals at all for it. (Participant #8)

Although immense uncertainty and a significant evolutionary period, one FAR stated their optimism and excitement for being FAR during this pivotal time in intercollegiate athletics history. They shared desire to play important roles in this historic period of evolution in college athletics in their open-ended question asking for input to other FARs:

When I have been in rooms with FARs in our old conference and new conference none of us probably signed up for what's going on, but I feel like it's a part of the evolution and a hundred years from now it'll be part of history. It's easy to just sit back and poke holes and Monday morning quarterback – and there is space for that, I think it's necessary.

There are some very valid critiques about you know, the so-called amateur model and holding onto the past but understanding equity and understanding the rights of student-athletes from the point of revenue, employment status, free agency, collective bargaining, Title IX, and the impacts on higher education as an industry at large. What more would you want to do than to be in the middle of all of that? And doing your part, and whatever your perspective and discipline is, take it on and embrace it as opposed to just being a curmudgeonly, 'woe is me', or 'I told you so' type

thing. That's just not helpful and it shuts people down, and kind of deters from any effectiveness that we could have in this less than fortunate, less than ideal situation. (Participant #7)

Summary

The role that FARs played in conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024 was minimal to non-existent. Eleven of the 12 participants stated not playing a role in the decision to leave one conference and join another. Five of these were completely in the dark until the decision was announced publicly with one FAR finding out about the decision via X (Twitter).

With respect to the role of the FAR following a realignment decision or announcement, all 12 participants claimed having a role in the conference transition process from one conference to another. These answers provided many perspectives on the role of FARs and potential best practices for FARs who face conference realignment at their institution in the future. Participants shed light the importance of roles such as translating perspectives of student-athletes to institutional leaders, working with institutional leaders to changes policies and processes to best align with the new conference, staying proactive and assertive, and supporting all student-athletes as unintended consequences to Olympic sports can occur. FARs believe they are pivotal to college athletics and Participant #3 who served as FAR in two conferences stated FARs are not just symbolic, but their role is significant in the current transformative period of intercollegiate athletics with conference realignment, the transfer portal, and Name, Image, and Likeness:

Division I college athletics is at such a messy point of inflection. That I'm not actually sure we have a good or clear north compass from my perspective. I think at this point we don't understand how to really support the student and the athlete who is the same person because the athletic side

has become so disrupted. In a situation where the student side has largely stayed stable and that for me is the single biggest thing that we have to focus on getting right. The tragedy of all the very student-athlete centered decisions (such as the transfer portal or NIL) that have been made may have the unintended negative consequences that can be potentially damaging to those same students. I think the philosophical role of FAR is to ensure wholeness of the student-athlete experience – the academic experience and the co-curricular experience – which is unique for student-athletes. (Participant #3)

Even though FARs identified the ‘messy point of inflection’ and concerns about the broader impact of conference realignment on student-athletes, FARs still describe their responsibilities as crucial in supporting student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership in adapting to new conference policies, regulations, and expectations. FARs stated this could occur through clear communication, proactive engagement, collaboration across institutional departments, and a focus on student-athletes receiving the appropriate support during the transition.

Participants highlighted that external financial and competitive pressures largely drive realignment decisions, with FARs often excluded from key discussions unless institutional leaders anticipated faculty pushback. Additionally, FARs acknowledged the increasing marginalization of their role in intercollegiate athletics, particularly when athletic departments are well-resourced. To maintain relevance, FARs emphasized the need to be proactive and assertive in engaging with decision-makers, advocating for student-athletes, and helping institutions navigate the long-term consequences of realignment.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Conference realignment is not a new phenomenon but the speed at which, quantity of, and magnitude of these decisions fiscally, culturally, and the impact on student-athletes has continued to increase. The role of faculty in leadership of intercollegiate athletics has also changed immensely. Previously, faculty held immense oversight of athletic operations and important decisions such as conference membership, but that has changed hands to athletic directors and presidents. Faculty leadership has evolved into the identification of one FAR at each NCAA member institution who is tasked with ensuring institutional control of athletics, academic integrity of athletics, and student-athlete wellbeing. The purpose of this study was to understand the role that FARs play in conference realignment. The desired understanding is the role FARs play in the decision and ensuing transition period when leaving one conference and joining another.

The purpose of this study was to identify the role – or lack thereof – FARs play in conference realignment decisions. Furthermore, once a conference realignment decision is made what roles and responsibilities do FARs identify having to support student-athletes, fellow faculty, and institutional leadership in the transition to a new conference. This study was able to highlight the level of engagement FARs have in conference realignment decisions and find how FARs support student-athletes and their institutions while transitioning conferences.

Conference realignment has been occurring in higher education since the late 1800s. Historically, conference membership decisions were led by faculty athletics leaders who made decisions based on regionality, institutional size, and similarities with

peer conference institutions (Sweitzer, 2009). Modern conference realignment has evolved and the speed with which these decisions occur has increased, the financial impact has become astronomical, reasons behind institutions deciding to change conference membership have evolved, and the individuals driving these decisions have changed (Groza, 2010; Kramer II, 2016; Toma & Kramer II, 2009).

For the substantial impact modern conference realignment has on the student-athlete experience and their academic pursuits there has been little to no research on the involvement, roles, perspectives, and responsibilities of faculty athletics representatives in the conference realignment process. This study was able to add to the sparse literature, expand on FARs perspectives of athletics leadership, and answer the research questions.

The following two research questions were analyzed to understand the roles, responsibilities, and perspectives of FARs in the conference realignment process:

1. What role did faculty athletics representatives (FARs) play in FBS conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024?
 - a. Did this role vary based on the conference level or the type of conference movement?
2. How do faculty athletics representatives (FARs) describe their role in supporting stakeholders – student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership – during a change in conference membership?

Summary & Discussion of Main Findings

A phenomenological study was conducted to address the aforementioned research questions. Eleven of the 12 FARs in the sample claimed to play no role in the decision to change conference membership. The lone FAR who stated playing a role in the

conference realignment decision served as FAR at the only institution in the study sample that realigned from an FCS to FBS conference. FARs transitioning from one FBS conference to a different FBS conference played no role in the decision to change conferences.

The lone participant stated playing a role in the decision to change conferences they still ranked themselves as fourth out of five in terms of significance in the decision. When asked to rank individuals from most significant to least significant in the decision to change conference this participant ranked the President, Athletic Director, and Board of Trustees ahead of themselves and only had more significance in the decision than Student-Athletes.

All 12 participants noted the lack of or diminished role in the conference realignment decision from the FAR. When asked to rank the Board of Trustees, President, Athletic Director, Faculty Athletics Representative, and Student-Athletes from most significant to least significant role in conference realignment decisions, five FARs mentioned themselves as the least significant, four FARs mentioned themselves as the second least significant in front of only student-athletes, and three FARs left themselves out of the rankings completely (Table 4.4).

Ultimately, FARs identified the president as having the most significant role in the decision of a university leaving one conference for another. ADs were the second most significant and alongside president's were the only stakeholders to play a role in all 12 conference realignment decisions. The third most important stakeholder in the decision were Board of Trustees. After a step drop off, Student-Athletes and FARs came in at fourth and last in significance in the decision-making process (Table 4.5).

The sub-question of research question #1 – Did this role vary based on the conference level or the type of conference movement? – was answered through interview question #2. FARs were asked – At what stage of the decision-making process were you inundated with the information of the conference realignment decision? – and it was found that three FARs were inundated with the information and asked to play a role prior to this announcement being made (Table 4.6). The only FAR at an institution that realigned from an FCS to FBS conference and was adamant about playing a role in the decision, therefore one could say that the role does differentiate depending on if the realignment decision is one that is within the FBS or one from the FCS to the FBS.

Within the FBS, the findings showed that there was no difference in the role FARs play in the conference realignment type – Power Five to Power Five, Group of Five to Power Five, or Group of Five to Group of Five – yet there is a significant difference that occurs based on the magnitude of geographic or subdivision change. The two FARs at the two institutions that went from a regional to national conference and the FAR at the FCS to FBS institution played a much more substantial role in the conference realignment process than the other nine participants. One could derive the president, AD, and trustees who made these conference realignment decisions assumed more significant backlash from faculty and therefore included FARs in the process after the decision was made but before it was announced publicly.

In the second research question, FARs described their role in supporting stakeholders – student-athletes, faculty colleagues, and institutional leadership during a change in conference membership. FARs described their roles as much more significant in the conference transition period than they did in the decision to change conferences.

All participants stated involvement in the conference transition period and identified many important roles of support to student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership in the transition from the old conference to the new conference.

FARs identified many responsibilities in supporting stakeholders during a conference membership transition. Responsibilities and themes arose across interviews with an emphasis on: Streamlined communication and listening to student-athletes leads to the best support possible; FAR roles vary immensely from campus to campus; being proactive & assertive as FAR in order to be involved in important decisions; a larger responsibility for FARs in cross-country conference realignment; collaboration with various institutional stakeholders is a necessity; onboarding with the new conference & policy tweaking; and awards & student-athlete recognition opportunities.

Other findings that could also be important for FARs and the expansion of literature on faculty leadership of athletics and conference realignment including unintended consequences & teams are impacted differently; external parties are ‘driving’ realignment, and financial increases and the ability to become peer institutions with aspirant institutions push realignment decisions. In relation to the position of the FAR there was an emphasis from participants on the lack of defined responsibilities in the role, the diminished role of the FAR if the athletic department is properly resourced and adequately staffed, and the lack of a ‘north star’ in intercollegiate athletics combined with the continued decline of the impact of FARs on intercollegiate athletics.

FARs emphasized the importance of effective listening and translating the voices of student-athletes to best support their needs, support institutional stakeholders in changing university policies and university processes to align with the conference

change, identifying opportunities for student-athletes to receive awards, scholarships, and research opportunities in the new conference, and recognizing any unintended consequences that can occur to Olympic sport student-athletes in the conference realignment process. Additionally, participants placed substantial emphasis on the need for FARs to be proactive and assertive in order to ‘have a seat at the table’ to effectively support student-athletes, faculty, and other institutional stakeholders. Guidance to FARs at institutions that are in the midst of a conference realignment decision, have recently announced a conference change, are in the transitional period, or have just joined a new conference is important as this process can take years and be a very impactful decision to student-athletes, faculty, and institutional stakeholders.

Perspectives of FARs

Chapter 2 identified literature on conference realignment and the role of FARs in intercollegiate athletics leadership. This study amplified findings of previous publications by FARs – Munger (2014) and Shannon (2017). Significant emphasis in this study by FARs was placed on the importance of collaboration with internal and external constituents which aligns with findings by Shannon (2017).

This study built expansively upon Munger’s (2014) expansive survey of FARs that identified the key roles and responsibilities of the role. This study supported the findings that the role of the FAR varies immensely from campus to campus and the three main responsibilities of FARs in the modern era of intercollegiate athletics are to ‘ensure institutional control of the athletic department, maintain academic integrity, and foster the welfare of student-athletes’. Those two findings were identified and expanded upon by multiple participants throughout the study. A FAR in this study served on the core

planning group during the conference transition and mentioned “the way that I think about the FAR role is it's focused around (1) institutional control, (2) student-athlete wellbeing, and (3) academic integrity (Participant #1).”

Academic Capitalism Theory

Academic Capitalism Theory (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) was the framework employed to answer the research questions and add to the literature on conference realignment and faculty leadership of intercollegiate athletics. This study validated Kramer II's (2014) claim that the application of academic capitalism theory in conference realignment could explain the role of campus stakeholders in the decision-making process and in understanding the “interplay between revenue-seeking and visibility increases associated with athletic conference realignment” (Kramer II, 2014, p. 148).

The use of the academic capitalism theory can explain the non-existent role FARs had in FBS conference realignment decisions due to institutions partaking in market-oriented behaviors. Economic forces heavily influenced conference realignment decisions as universities acted in entrepreneurial ways to find increased revenues, stronger conference peer institutions in a more prestigious conference, heightened brand awareness, and benefits to enrollment.

Marginalization of FARs derived from institutions prioritizing capitalistic reasons over academic reasons in conference realignment decisions. A few of the comments that explained this marginalization include, “these are money decisions. Generally speaking nobody wants faculty much involved with money decisions” (Participant #8) and “I just hate that we've incorporated college athletics to the point of it's all about the money and the TV” (Participant #10).

This study expands academic capitalism theory in higher education and intercollegiate athletics literature. To begin, the participants in the study emphasized their lack of role in conference realignment decision-making process because of the economic driving factors of the decision. This explains the market-oriented conference membership decisions that presidents and athletic directors make to increase external funding through conference distributions. Furthermore, participants stated student recruitment, institutional prestige, and increases in peer member institutions as reasons that justified the realignment decision and would in turn improve the bottom line of the athletic department.

Slaughter & Leslie (1997) posit that the shift to academic capitalism within higher education altered the core mission of higher education. Although the capitalistic evolution can lead to economic growth, there are concerns about academic integrity and the long-term role of universities in society. Participants in this study echoed similar concerns about the evolution of intercollegiate athletics due to the hope for economic gain. “I think it’s sad that this great collegiate athletic model is now where it is” (Participant #2). Ultimately, the shift in economic priorities in higher education and intercollegiate athletics continued to become amplified in decisions such as conference realignment.

Implications for Practice

The FAR participants in this study had a near zero role on the decision-making process in the fourth era (2021-2024) of modern conference realignment. Conference realignment is a phenomenon that has occurred since the infancy of intercollegiate athletics, and it will continue to occur in the years ahead. It is important for FARs to be

proactive and assertive on their campuses in order to play any role in important athletic department decisions such as these.

The FAR also must be committed to the three key responsibilities in their role (1) ensure institutional control of the athletic department, (2) maintain academic integrity, and (3) foster the welfare of student-athletes. However, this begs the question: if the individual that is supposed to focus on institutional control of athletics, academic integrity, and the wellbeing of student-athletes is not involved in a decision as impactful as conference realignment from a regional to national conference, is it even worthwhile for institutions to continue to have a FAR? A participant that faced this type of conference realignment decision at their institution stated “I think the FARs role has been weakened. The FARs are used when it's convenient to hide behind a sort of academic veneer (Participant #2).”

It is important to note that even if the FAR never receives an invitation to the decision table in a decision like conference realignment they can still play a substantial role after the decision. This role requires the FAR to be proactive and have built strong relationships with institutional stakeholders – student-athletes, academic leaderships (provost, registrar, faculty senate, etc...), and athletics leadership (athletic director, compliance, student-athlete academic services, etc...). Meeting student-athletes where they are physically – SAAC meetings, athletic training facilities, study hall, etc... – and conducting effective two-way communication – listening and speaking – is of the utmost importance in knowing how to support student-athletes in the aftermath of any significant athletic department decision.

Uncertainty in the ‘north star’ of intercollegiate athletics and the roles of FARs in athletics leadership have made it difficult for proper support of student-athletes. To address this uncertainty it is important for higher education leaders – in conjunction with FARs and student-athletes – identify what the next era of intercollege athletics will look like and for the identification of roles for FARs to solidify their presence in college athletics. Although the NCAA requires each member institution to have a FAR, there is a “nebulous job description” that makes it difficult for FARs to operate effectively. These standards could be identified at the conference level, since a national framework might be ineffective. After this, each institution can define any additional responsibilities for the FAR on their campus. We know that the role of FARs varies across institutions, but a general framework of the minimum tasks and roles would better prepare FARs to support student-athletes, fellow faculty, and institutional leaders.

Limitations

A handful of limitations occurred in this study including the timing of the interviews, participants in the sample, and the wording of a question that was asked. Timing of the study was a limitation because some institutions had just completed the transition to their new conference on August 1st, 2024 meaning participants had only been in the new conference for a few months at the time of the interview. These FARs in some cases had little insight on post transition to the new conference. Future research could be conducted on the same sample to see if perspectives of FARs changed after they had witnessed one or more academic years in the new conference.

A limitation is that the only participants in the study were FARs, which was beneficial to be able to provide them with a platform but led to some shortcomings in the

study. The perspectives of presidents, athletic directors, student-athletes, or other faculty members could be impactful in future research. Furthermore, FARs identified other stakeholders that had key roles in the decision process such as politicians or media executives which could also be part of a future study.

The next limitation with the sample is this study was only able to find one participant that was the FAR at an institution that left the FCS and joined the FBS. Participant #12 provided important findings, but unfortunately the individual was the only FAR who participated with this type of conference move. It would be important to interview a second FAR from an institution that realigned from FCS to FBS to gauge their perspective and if the magnitude of involvement in the decision and ensuing transition process was as strong as the participant in this study.

Another limitation occurred when the researcher asked FARs to rank the following individuals based on impact in the conference realignment decisions – Board of Trustees, President, Athletic Director, FAR, and student-athletes (Table 4.4). The researcher only provided internal stakeholders as options and not external stakeholders such as donors or alumni. Although the question before this one was open-ended asking FARs who made the decision, only listing these five internal stakeholders in the follow-up question could have missed an opportunity to reinforce academic capitalism if participants stated that donors had more control in the decision than FARs did.

The final limitation in the study revolves around not asking the FAR what their role is in other important decisions within the athletic department on their campus. The ability to understand a FARs role and involvement in other decisions could help explain why a FAR might not be involved in a decision such as conference realignment. For

example, if a university is implementing a Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policy handbook and a FAR is not involved in that process it may not be surprising that they are not involved in a decision process such as conference realignment.

Future Research

The study did not ask FARs why they believe conference realignment occurs. This is due to the research questions focus of the how and role FARs played instead of the why. Ultimately, there were participants who stated the economic reasons that pushed the decisions but a question about the reason for conference realignment decisions could further expand or debunk the academic capitalism theoretical framework of conference realignment.

FARs in the study who played the most substantial roles in the process were either (1) proactive and assertive or (2) at an institution that had the most substantial conference membership change such as moving from the FCS to FBS or from a regional conference to a national conference. A study could be conducted with presidents or trustees as the sample to identify how they view the role of the FAR is in the process.

A similar study could be conducted with student-athletes to gauge their perspectives or role in decisions that influence their experience such as conference realignment. FARs stated student-athletes had zero input in the conference realignment decision and minimal impact in the conference transition period so perspectives of student-athletes from their voice could be impactful for higher education and intercollegiate athletics literature.

Additionally, there was only one participant that was at an institution that went from the FCS to the FBS, so future research can be conducted by studying a different

FCS to FBS FAR to corroborate the experience and the significance of the role of the FAR during this conference change.

This study uncovered external stakeholders with key roles in conference realignment decisions such as conference commissioners, media executives, and politicians. These parties are all external to a university and can be used to shed a light on who truly makes a conference realignment decision and also if the key reasons for doing so are economic reasons. Furthermore, future research can ask these parties and others such as donors and alumni who leads the transition process from one conference to another and the reason for these decisions.

Conclusion

Faculty athletics representatives played a relatively non-existent role in conference realignment decisions that occurred between 2021-2024. FARs lack of role can be attributed to academic capitalism and institutional leaders – presidents, athletic directors, and trustees – making the decision in hopes of increased revenues, institutional brand, enrollment, caliber of peer institutions, and prestige of the new conference. Once a conference realignment decision was made, the FAR had many responsibilities during the conference membership transition process. In the most evolutionary time in intercollegiate athletics history, it is important for FARs to be assertive and proactive in finding a seat at the decision table in order to ensure institutional control of athletics, academic integrity, and above all else the well-being of student-athletes.

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APPENDIX A

INITIAL EMAIL OUTREACH

<NAME>,

I hope all is well in <Campus City> and that you are enjoying your fall semester. My name is Austin Mullen and I am completing my dissertation on the role of Faculty Athletics Representatives (FARs) in conference realignment.

As the FAR at <University Name> you have witnessed the change in membership from <Old Conference> to <New Conference> and I would greatly appreciate your participation in my study.

To participate please complete this brief survey (link is also below) and I will follow up to schedule an approximately 45-60 minute Zoom interview about your role and support opportunities as the FAR during the conference realignment process.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and please let me know if you have any questions!

<Link to the Google Form>

All the best,
Austin

APPENDIX B

FOLLOW-UP EMAIL SCRIPT

<Name>,

I am sorry for the double email, but I am following up in relation to my email from Monday requesting your participation in my dissertation.

As the FAR at <University> you witnessed the change in membership from <Old Conference> to <New Conference> and I would greatly appreciate your participation in my study on the role of Faculty Athletics Representatives (FARs) before, during, and after conference realignment decisions.

To participate please complete this brief survey (link is also below) and I will follow up to schedule a 45-60 minute Zoom interview about your role and support opportunities as the FAR during the conference realignment process.

Please let me know if you have any questions about the study. I look forward to hearing from you soon and hope you are willing to participate!

<Link to Google Form>

All the best,
Austin

APPENDIX C

GENERAL INTEREST SURVEY

A general interest survey for potential participants to compile pertinent information and confirm status as FAR during conference realignment decision and transition period.

Role of the Faculty Athletics Representative in Conference Realignment

<NAME>,

“Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in my dissertation study on the role FARs play in conference realignment decisions and once these decisions are made the support FARs provide stakeholders in the transition to the new conference.

The goal of this research is to answer the following two research questions.

1. What role did faculty athletics representatives play in FBS conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024?
 - a. Did this role vary based on the conference level or the type of conference movement?
2. How do faculty athletics representatives describe their role in supporting stakeholders – student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership – during a change in conference membership?

Austin Mullen – austin.mullen@temple.edu
Temple IRB Protocol No. 31871”

Please answer the following demographic questions. This data will only be viewed by the research team and only reported in aggregate (e.g., averages) in conference presentations and academic publications.

The following survey information and interview findings will remain anonymous. Your participation will be greatly appreciated and help expand the sparse literature on the role FARs play in modern day conference realignment.”

- First & Last Name (This information is private and only used to match demographic information)

- Preferred Email Address (This information is private and only used to match demographic information)
- Please state the month and year when you became the FAR at your institution. (Ex. March 2018)
- In addition to serving as FAR, do you hold an administrative position at your institution? (Ex. Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs)
- Were you a student-athlete?
- Would you be willing to participate in a 45-60 minute Zoom interview on your perceptions and experience as a FAR during conference realignment?

Thank you for your response. In the coming days you will receive a follow-up email from Austin Mullen. Should questions arise before then, please feel free to reach out to austin.mullen@temple.edu.

All the best,
Austin

APPENDIX D

FOLLOW-UP EMAIL TO WILLING AND ELIGIBLE PARTICIPANTS

<Name>,

Thank you for filling out the survey and for your willingness to participate. I know you are very busy in your roles as <list of roles>, among many other roles I am sure, so thank you.

With this said, are you available any of the following dates and times for 45-60 minutes? If not no worries we can look further out.

- Date & Time Option #1
- Date & Time Option #2
- Date & Time Option #3

Once we figure out a time, I will send a calendar invitation with the Zoom link and some additional information.

All the best,
Austin

APPENDIX E

CALENDAR INVITATION WITH APPLICABLE IRB INFORMATION

Role of the Faculty Athletics Representative in Conference Realignment

Information

- Who: Austin Mullen & <Participant's Name>
- What: Interview about perceptions as FAR during a conference realignment decision and the transition process
- When: <Date & Time>
- Where: <Zoom Link>
- Why: Dissertation on the Role of the Faculty Athletics Representative in Conference Realignment

Additional Information

- Attached as a document is the IRB Research Consent Form
- Zoom will be recorded for audio transcription. All transcripts will use a pseudonym for participant and institution.
- Research Questions
 - i. What role did faculty athletics representatives play in FBS conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024?
 1. Did this role vary based on P5/Group of 5 or level of movement?
 - ii. How do faculty athletics representatives describe or anticipate their role in supporting stakeholders -- student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership -- during a change in conference membership?

Austin Mullen
austin.mullen@temple.edu
Temple IRB Protocol No. 31871

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Participants were asked the following interview questions which aligned with the identified research questions.

- a. Research Question #1: What role did faculty athletics representatives play in FBS conference realignment decisions from 2021-2024?
 - Sub Research Question #1: Did this role vary based on the conference level or the type of conference movement?
 - i. Do you feel you played a role in the decision-making process of leaving your previous conference and joining your new conference?
-- If needed, can you please talk me through that process?
 - ii. At what stage of the decision-making process were you inundated with the information of the conference realignment decision?
 - iii. Do you feel you played a role in the conference realignment decision?
 - iv. From your perspective, what individuals played the most significant role in the conference realignment decision?
 - v. From largest to smallest, can you please rank the following individuals based on impact in the conference realignment decision?
 - a. Board of Trustees
 - b. President
 - c. Athletic Director
 - d. Faculty Athletics Representative
 - e. Student-Athletes
 - vi. Is there anything else about the conference realignment process or stakeholders that you believe are applicable?
- b. Research Question #2: How do faculty athletics representatives describe their role in supporting stakeholders – student-athletes, faculty, and institutional leadership – during a change in conference membership?
 - i. After the conference realignment decision was made, what role did you play in this transition?
 - ii. How, if at all, did you support student-athletes during this transition?
 - iii. How, if at all, did you support other faculty members following the realignment decision?
 - iv. How, if at all, did you support institutional leadership such as President, Trustees, or Provost in this transition?
 - v. Now that your institution has realigned, in retrospect, is there anything that you would have done differently?
 - vi. Is there anything else that you would like to mention about your role in conference realignment as the faculty athletics representative?