

# 'We Are in a Better Place': Conference Realignment's Effect on the Culture of One NCAA I Athletic Department

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## Abstract

Conference realignment has been one of the dominant transformational changes in college athletics over the past 10 years. The financial ramifications of realignment are significant. Moves into the Big 10 and Southeastern Conferences are expected to increase income for new members by approximately \$60 million and \$26 million, respectively (Rittenberg, 2022; Young, 2021). Hoffer and Pinson (2015) further demonstrate that while additional revenue led to increased expenditures, realigned FBS schools did see a marginal increase in profit. Though financial ramifications have garnered the most attention, many changes stemming from realignment deal with the less quantitative aspects of athletics. For example, the evaporation of traditional rivalries, increase in travel schedules, emergence of new media partners, and changes in competition levels could all have an impact on the cultures of realigned athletic departments (Havard, et al., 2017; Perline, 2012). However, little research has examined these qualitative aspects of conference realignment. Therefore, this study used the organizational culture model to examine the effects of conference realignment on the culture of one NCAA Division I athletic department.

For over four decades, Coastal University had been the lone private member of an NCAA Division I non-football conference. In the mid 2010's, Coastal pursued an invitation to a new conference comprised entirely of private schools almost entirely similar in enrollment. After hiring a new athletic director with historical connections to the new conference, Coastal was offered and accepted an invitation. To assess the effect of the conference change on Coastal's athletic department culture, interviews with administrators and coaches were conducted before and after the move. Prior to the conference shift, seven administrators and 13 head coaches were interviewed about the status of the culture. After two years in the new league, nine head coaches, seven administrators, and the university president participated in interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were then interpreted using thematic analysis (Brain & Clark, 2006).

Results indicated that the culture of the athletic department was dysfunctional in its original conference. Coastal's athletic culture was described as compartmentalized and difficult to integrate. While positive values were espoused, they were undercut by skepticism and a survival mentality. After two years in a new conference, Coastal's culture had shifted. Coaches and administrators felt increased pride within their athletic department, believed their programs were more visible, and the department had improved its brand. As a result, they felt recruiting had improved which even extended to non-athlete students. This shift occurred despite a noticeable lack of success in the new conference and lingering resource shortfalls.

These results reflect the subjective nature of athletic department culture. Schein (2017) contends that culture consists of shared basic assumptions that drive behavior in an organization. The conference change at Coastal did lead to the development of new assumptions and behavioral changes within the athletic department. Implications for universities changing culture and athletic directors leading these realignments will be offered.