

More Than a Move: Perceptions of Division III Presidents of Conference Realignment

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The landscape of collegiate athletics in the United States has undergone a significant transformation with continuous conference realignment, a process wherein universities shift affiliations between athletic conferences. While existing research has extensively explored the nuances of conference realignment within NCAA Division I (Farley et al. 2017; Groza, 2010; Havard et al., 2013; Havard & Eddy 2013; Havard et al., 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Havard & Dalakas, 2017; Hoffer & Pincin, 2015; Kogan & Greyser, 2014; Kramer & Trivette, 2012; Kramer, 2016; Petersen & Judge, 2021; Taylor et al. 2018), there is a noticeable gap in understanding the realignment in other divisions, particularly Division III. Division III athletics, distinguished by its emphasis on the educational experience of student-athletes and the absence of athletic scholarships (NCAA, n.d.), holds a unique position within the NCAA. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Division III Presidents who went through a conference realignment.

Despite the NCAA's emphasis on the educational aspect of college athletics, commercialization concerns, particularly in major sports like football and basketball, have emerged (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013; Southall et al., 2008, 2009, 2014). The Division III approach, centered on education-based athletics, introduces unique decision-making dynamics, with Division III Presidents playing a crucial role in shaping the future within their distinct context. This study investigates these dynamics in the context of conference realignment, contributing to a deeper understanding of how Division III institutions balance athletic and academic priorities. Recent substantial shifts in conference affiliations, primarily driven by the pursuit of financial security and revenue-boosting opportunities, have been observed at the Division I level. The problem surrounding conference realignment in Division III centers on the widening gap between resource-rich and resource-limited institutions. Semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore and generate an in-depth understanding of presidential considerations guiding realignment decisions within this unique division.

Using an interpretive qualitative design, this study explored Division III Presidents perceptions on conference realignment. Virtual semi-structured interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) will be conducted with five participants at five Division III institutions across one conference who were recruited using purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2013). The criteria for participation in the study were: (a) being a President at a Division III institution, and (b) have worked at an institution that has undergone conference realignment. Participants were asked to share their experiences with conference realignment in 20-30 minutes interviews.

The data collection is in process, with four interviews completed to date. Before analysis, interview transcripts will be transcribed verbatim, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six steps for thematic data analysis: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Thematic analysis is an approach used to recognize, examine, and communicate patterns (themes) inherent in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019), serving as the systematic foundation for this study. The researchers will first familiarize themselves with the data by engaging in repeated readings of the interview transcripts while searching for patterns. During this procedure, themes will be formulated, and the initial codes will be deductively assigned to a

thematic category (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2016). The lead author will develop a coding manual that will serve as a reference for consistency in coding. The coding process will continue with the lead author and another member of the research team developing initial themes and will meet to discuss any discrepancies. Through collaborative discussion, our preliminary codes will undergo comparison, with a focus on "questioning and challenging the assumptions made in interpreting and coding the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). This iterative process will lead to the formation of themes, and the initial codes that will be deductively allocated to corresponding thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2016). Throughout each step, reflexivity and interpretation will be incorporated, with reflexivity defined as "self-reflection by the researcher on their assumptions, biases, predispositions, and actions" (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 300).

Initial codes suggests that conference realignment in Division III involves key players such as presidents, consultants, attorneys, commissioners, and athletic directors. These preliminary findings indicate that the process is intricate, encompassing information gathering, stakeholder meetings, legal considerations, application submission, site visits, Presidents' votes, and external announcements. Considerations for realignment include financial aid and admission models, alignment with the NCAA, and a focus on a holistic student-athlete experience. Presidents hold significant influence, forming alliances and positive relationships. The student-athlete experience is significantly impacted, though they are not directly involved in decision-making. Creative solutions, such as a 4-day class schedule, aim to maintain balance during transitions. DI's influence on DIII is limited, but effects on the macro-level perception of universities. Modern trends like the transfer portal and NIL have indirect effects. Leadership roles, complex negotiations, and strategic decision-making are crucial throughout the realignment process.

By exploring the reasons behind their participation in realignment and understanding its implications for institutions and stakeholders, this study aims to contribute nuanced insights to the ongoing discourse on the evolving landscape of collegiate sports. The findings will shed light on how Division III institutions navigate the complexities of conference realignment, providing valuable perspectives that can inform decision-making processes within this distinctive context.