The landscape of intercollegiate athletics continues to evolve and become increasingly dynamic. One of the most visible aspects of these changes is athletic conference realignment. During the period from 2010 to 2013, over 30 institutions across the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) joined a different athletic conference or announced imminent changes to do so (Mandel, 2012). Conference realignment is described as an institutional decision to change athletic conference affiliation (Covell & Barr, 2010; Groza, 2010; Sweitzer, 2009). Conferences have historically been characterized by long-term stability in membership and typically assist in establishing rules for fair athletic play, provide a unified voice for the leadership of each of the member institutions, and maintain a role as the liaison with external constituents (Covell & Barr, 2010; Duderstadt, 2003). Despite these characteristics, it is unclear why conference occurs which may indicate that some conferences tend to these roles better than others.

Scholarly literature in this area addresses issues related to conference realignment and conference affiliation. For example, issues including parity among conference members (Eckard, 1998; Groza, 2010; Sutter & Winkler, 2003), revenue associated with conference television broadcast rights (Eckard, 1998; Groza, 2010; Perline & Stoldt, 2007; Quirk, 2004; Rhoads, 2004; Sutter & Winkler, 2003; Sweitzer, 2009; Tucker, 2005), the overall visibility of conferences and their member institutions (Carmichael, 2002; Groza, 2010; Sutter & Winkler, 2003; Sweitzer, 2009; Toma, 1999; Tucker, 2004; Tucker, 2005), the athletic profile of conferences and their member institutions (Groza, 2010, Price & Sen, 2003; Quirk, 2004; Suggs, 2004), the academic profile of conferences and their member institutions (Carmichael, 2002; Groza, 2010; Shulman & Bowen, 2002; Sweitzer, 2009), regional homogeneity of conference member institutions (Perline & Stoldt, 2007; Sweitzer, 2009), and connections with external constituents (Carmichael, 2002; Flowers, 2007; Frank, 2004; Sutter & Winkler, 2003; Tucker, 2004) have been highlighted and examined. Through a scholarly review of the relevant literature, Nwosu (2012) conceptualized these issues into seven factors which may influence conference realignment decisions for member institutions and athletic conferences: Competitive Balance, Revenue, Exposure, Athletic Prestige, Academic Prestige, Team Travel, and Alumni (Fan) Proximity. These factors helped to create the Realignment Rating Index (Nwosu, 2012). The Realignment Rating Index (RRI) is a tool designed to assess individual institutions and conferences that have engaged in realignment across the various indicators producing a single ratio score.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the seven factors that comprise the RRI to establish validity of the instrument. Principal-Agent theory (Ross, 1973; Eisenhardt, 1989) is utilized as the theoretical framework to view conference realignment from the perspective of the institution as the “agent” with the conference as the principal. For the purposes of this study, five
NCAA FBS institutions are examined. Results indicate that three of the five institutional changes in conference affiliation were rated as moderately beneficial (7.14/10). One institution’s shift in affiliation was rated as highly beneficial (8.57/10) while the remaining institution’s change in affiliation was rated as negligible (5.14/10). Information from an institution’s final year in a particular conference and its first year in a different conference served as the key data utilizing college football as the context for assessment due to football’s exposure as the primary spectator sport in intercollegiate athletics (Toma, 1999).

This study provides value for scholars and practitioners in higher education, athletic administration, and sport management as it will provide a better understanding of considerations addressed during institutional conference realignment decisions. Discussion will allow scholars and practitioners to gain insight on the strategic process that influences conference realignment, identify implications for institutions and other stakeholders impacted by conference realignment, and address recommendations for institutions and stakeholders to consider related to conference realignment to improve transitions. The study also helps to strengthen the validity of the RRI as a tool that scholars and practitioners may use a priori or ex post facto to assess institutions’ changes in conference affiliation. Future directions may include an examination of NCAA FBS conferences utilizing the RRI through the framework of Principal-Agent theory (Ross, 1973; Eisenhardt, 1989).
References


