

University of California, Los Angeles

**Conference Realignment: Building a Sustainable Future**

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## **Introduction**

Collegiate sports are facing a period of dramatic and ongoing change. In the past five years, Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) legislation has granted student-athletes newfound leverage and empowerment, the transfer portal has introduced a chaotic free-agency-like dynamic, and conference realignment has uprooted the geographical and historical foundations of college sports. Conference media contracts driven entirely by football revenue have pushed universities to make increasingly controversial moves to maximize much-needed revenue, consolidating power among a few dominant conferences and creating an oligopolistic environment. The consequences of these shifts are redefining the student-athlete experience as a whole. Conference realignment invites economic, academic, logistical, and legal tradeoffs; to address this onslaught of challenges, we propose that college football must separate from the NCAA and form an independent league, allowing it to maximize its commercial potential while reducing the strain on other collegiate sports.

## **Economic Benefits and Complications**

In recent years, college football fans have witnessed a historic wave of conference realignments, headlined by the dissolution of the Pac-12 Conference. The announced exit of UCLA and USC to enter the Big 10 Conference in 2022 triggered the eventual collapse of the conference, now coined the ‘Pac-2’ with only Washington State and Oregon State remaining. Media deals are the leading revenue source for conferences and the deciding factor in their ultimate success or demise. It is essential to understand why the Pac-12 and Big Ten have diverged in two opposite directions, and examining their former and current media contracts is key to understanding the lasting effects these deals have had. Starting in 1997, the Pac-12 had a 9 year deal with an annual payout of \$32.2 million while only a year prior the Big Ten had agreed to a much less valuable contract of 10 years with an annual payout of \$10 million: both contracts ended in 2006 (Exhibit 1). The following contract cycle of 2007 to 2016 would prove to be an unprecedeted time with the Big Ten launching their own network; this move would prove to be

successful with almost \$3 billion brought in over their original twenty year deal with FOX. In the years to follow, the Big Ten continued to take huge strides ahead of competing conferences.

The Pac-12's final TV contract before its collapse was a 12 year deal from 2012 to 2023 with an annual payout of \$250 million, an amount on par with the Big Ten and ahead of the SEC. With the end of the Pac-12's contract nearing in 2022, the conference had yet to secure a renewal contract for their respective universities prompting schools like USC and UCLA to find a home elsewhere. With no Pac-12 deal in place, athletic directors across the conference were under extreme pressure to find a higher paying contract fast. Lucky enough, the Big Ten had a contract set to go into effect in 2023 worth over \$8 billion with an annual payout of \$1.2 billion dollars (Exhibit 1). This dramatic increase in revenue made an otherwise impractical move for schools like UCLA and USC the best option available without a Pac-12 deal finalized. In 2026, each school in the Big Ten is projected to receive \$100.3 million in revenue (Figure 2), greatly surpassing previous Pac-12 revenues.

Many universities are still facing 'Pandemic Poverty' due to the loss of revenues via media rights, sponsorships and ticket sales in 2020 and 2021. According to the LA Times, UCLA posted a deficit of \$36.6 million for the 2023 fiscal year. UCLA has dealt with a six figure deficit from before the pandemic that has since widened due to the \$50 million dollar loss in revenue they posted during the 2021 fiscal year (Exhibit 3). The move to the Big Ten helps UCLA offset their debt and revenue losses with an estimated \$65 million to \$75 million in annual media rights payouts, \$40 million more than their former deal in the Pac-12 not including additional revenue from conference disbursements as part of the Big Ten's College Football Playoff and NCAA tournament appearances. Conference realignment not only helps athletic departments relieve millions of dollars of debt accumulated due to the pandemic but may soon help the universities and their respective athletic programs realize profits.

While select conferences and universities reap the financial benefits of conference realignment, many more will be left behind in relevance– meaning less fans, attention, and TV revenue. This decrease in relevance will lead to large economic implications including diminished ticket sales and a declining

donor base. The Big Ten and SEC, often called the ‘Power 2’, will continue to pull away from the pack with their collective leverage of talent and revenue. While UCLA’s move to the Big Ten provided the school with massive economic opportunity, the same is not true for its northern counterpart UC Berkeley (Cal). With the Pac-12 effectively destroyed, Cal was left to join the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) with an initial yearly payout of just \$20 million, which is a dramatic \$10 million less than their previous Pac-12 contract. Already crippled by debt from building a new stadium and pandemic losses, conference realignment further damaged UC Berkeley’s finances. While attention may mostly fall on the ‘winners’ of conference realignment like UCLA, many schools like Cal are getting the short end of the stick, which brings the long-term sustainability of conference realignment into question.

In addition to selective impact on revenue, conference realignment also slides certain programs a recruiting advantage in areas they might have been impaired in previously. For years, west coast teams have faced a recruiting disadvantage because of their disconnect from the South and the East coast. With so much talent in these territories, many recruits have preferred to stay home to continue their athletic career competing at big power-house schools in front of their families. After Conference Realignment, West coast schools (USC and UCLA specifically) are now able to attract top recruits nationwide and pull them West, an additional benefit of their Big 10 membership.

### **Academics:**

Conference realignment is quickly transforming the landscape of college athletics. While its impact extends far beyond the playing field and the realm of sports—with the focus centered on revenue generation, competitive balance, and fan engagement—one of the most significant consequences impacts an area often overlooked in this discourse: academics. For student-athletes, the balance between academic success and athletic commitments has always been delicate, and the added demands of realignment only heighten these challenges. It is important to explore the academic obstacles that student-athletes face due to realignment while also examining the opportunities it provides for universities to enhance their academic support while furthering institutional prestige.

One of the most pressing challenges posed by conference realignment in college athletics is the strain it places on student-athletes' academic performance and success. Increased travel demands, particularly in geographically expansive conferences like the Big Ten, threaten to disrupt student-athletes' routines, adding significant logistical and academic burdens. According to Amanda Paule-Koba, a professor at Bowling Green State University, "the stress of maintaining athletic performance and academic performance...is going to be an even larger burden on these athletes" (*Paule-Koba, Best Colleges*). The increasingly frequent travel required for competitions often leads to missed classes and diminished ability to adhere to a consistent academic routine, which is critical for a busy student-athlete.

The impact of time zone differences further exacerbates this challenge, as athletes are required to adapt to new schedules while trying to maintain focus and productivity. Completing assignments or rescheduling exams while on the road adds yet another layer of complexity. This can harm relationships with professors and peers—who now may struggle to accommodate the limited availability of traveling athletes—further complicating group projects and limiting student-athletes' opportunities for meaningful social engagement. Within this context, a 2021 study in the *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education* found that Big Ten football players—while being equipped with copious resources to help deal with extensive travel schedules—reported fatigue from travel, disruption of routines, and hasty accommodations as major obstacles to academic success, hindering their ability to complete assignments, participate in extracurriculars, and attend office hours (*Jandoli Institute*).

Moreover, student-athletes often experience workloads far exceeding those of their peers. In 2015, an NCAA research study found that D1 athletes spent a median of 38.5 hours per week on academics and 34 hours per week on athletics, resulting in a combined workload of 80-90 hours (*Drake Group, 2023*). While the study is slightly outdated, it provides testimony to the immense time demands placed on student-athletes—a burden that has likely increased in recent years due to added responsibilities and evolving expectations, such as Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) activities and expanding academic

commitments. As a result, student-athletes are often treated as professional athletes in terms of demands, yet without the corresponding compensation. Such heavy workloads leave little time for essential recovery, including sleep and mental health. Athletes reportedly average only 6.25 hours of sleep per night, further hindering their overall well-being (Drake Group, 2023). The strain is particularly acute for athletes in sports that do not generate as much revenue or public recognition. These student-athletes are expected to meet the same rigorous standards of academic and athletic excellence but often without the financial resources, sponsorships, or academic support systems afforded to their peers in revenue-generating sports like football and basketball. This disparity produces a stark inequity, where athletes in less-publicized and notorious sports bear the same physical, mental, and time demands while being assisted with far less. This becomes even more evident when travel and academic accommodations or itineraries are being compared between revenue-generating and less-recognized sports.

Additionally, the limited time available to student-athletes makes it difficult to participate in internships or other resume-building opportunities. These experiences are critical for career preparation, especially for athletes whose professional futures lie outside of sports. Missing out on these opportunities can leave student-athletes at a disadvantage compared to their non-athlete peers, who often have more flexibility to pursue internships, research roles, or networking events.

This reality underscores the broader challenge of being a student-athlete in the modern era. For many, the workload is comparable to that of a full-time job combined with part-time schooling. This balancing act leaves little room for personal development, professional preparation, or well-being, further illustrating the inequities student-athletes face in navigating their dual roles.

The ripple effects of these challenges are particularly evident in smaller institutions. While larger universities may have the resources to provide academic support—such as tutoring, flexible scheduling, and mental health services—smaller schools may struggle to offer the same level of assistance. This

further widens the gap between well-funded athletic programs and less-resourced institutions, creating inequities that often mirror those seen on the playing field.

Despite the challenges posed by conference realignment, the latter offers several opportunities to enhance academic outcomes for universities and their student-athletes as well. One of the most notable benefits—driven by the realignment’s enhanced revenue generating opportunities—concerns the potential for strengthening Athletic Departments’ academic resources and tools for student-athlete support.

Revenue from lucrative media deals and expanded audiences can be directed toward initiatives such as tailored tutoring programs and comprehensive mental health services. Moreover, for student-athletes who often miss in-person classes due to travel, remote learning has become an increasingly essential tool for maintaining academic progress.

Another major advantage is the potential to elevate a university’s academic prestige through alignment with academically elite institutions within the new conferences. For example, notably, all members of the Big Ten are part of the prestigious Association of American Universities (AAU), an organization that has served as a benchmark for academic research and excellence since its founding in the 19th century. Membership to the association is granted based on metrics such as research funding, faculty awards, and academic impact (Deseret News, 2021). These new collaborative efforts could see the enhancement of universities’ reputations while simultaneously fostering interdisciplinary collaborations that could benefit faculty, students, and student-athletes alike. This component of conference realignment has the potential to create opportunities for growth that extend well beyond the fields of competition.

Lastly, enhanced funding produced by the shift could allow universities to improve travel accommodations for their athletic programs. By reducing travel-related fatigue through better scheduling or chartered transportation, universities can mitigate the physical and mental tolls of frequent and increased travel. This could prove extremely beneficial for the athletes’ busy schedules. This combination of increased financial resources and elevated institutional standing positions universities to address the

academic challenges posed by realignment while simultaneously strengthening their overall profile. The alignment of academic prestige with robust support systems creates a pathway for universities to thrive in both academics and athletics, offering long-term benefits for all stakeholders. As conferences like the Big Ten continue to expand, universities must prioritize addressing the academic implications of these changes to ensure student-athletes are not left behind in pursuit of athletic success.

## **Travel**

West Virginia University (WVU) has long been synonymous with extensive travel since joining the Big 12 Conference in 2012. Due to their isolated geographic location from other Big 12 schools like Texas and Oklahoma, WVU has faced financial obstacles as the most geographically challenged university not only in the Big 12, but in the nation at the time. In fiscal year 2022, WVU incurred \$6.6 million in travel expenses, which accounted for 6.2% of their \$105 million total operating revenue (WVU Athletics). These costs, while significant, were relatively stable over the course of a decade and became a figure associated with high travel costs for a Power 5 athletic department nationwide. That was until the new chapter of conference realignment started and west coast schools such as UCLA and Oregon joined the Big Ten Conference in 2024, representing a new level of logistical complexity and expense. Unlike West Virginia's case, Oregon has to adapt and travel to the midwest and east coast, much farther than the south was for WVU. Oregon Athletic Director, Rob Mullens anticipates a 38.5% increase in travel expenses from fiscal year 2024 into fiscal year 2025. This raises Oregon's total athletic operating expenses up to roughly \$162.8 million for FY2025 (Clarke). This is a bump from the previous \$146.7 million in fiscal year 2023 when they were in the Pac-12 Conference (Oregon Athletics). This spike represents the heightened financial and logistical demands that this new chapter of conference realignment imposes on geographically distant but athletically relevant and eager schools.

While most conference realignment headlines focus on travel for football teams, women's teams playing multiple games in a week often accumulate more than double the mileage. The Stanford Women's Volleyball team, who joined the ACC in 2024, faces one of the most intense travel schedules in all of

college athletics. During the 2024 season, the team will travel 33,700 miles for only regular season contests, including 10 cross country trips averaging 3,000 miles each (Eisenberg). These statistics do not account for their post season travel like the NCAA Tournament, which they frequently win. This tournament would add another cross country trek to Louisville, Kentucky for the National Championship. Stanford Athletics' situation represents how conference realignment decisions often prioritize financial or football competitiveness over logistical common sense. While the move to the ACC offers a lifeline to an athletic department that was at risk of being left behind in all aspects of college sports, the cost to athletes is immense.

## **Title IX Challenges**

As the Big Ten and SEC continue to separate themselves as the financial and competitive giants of college sports, legal challenges surrounding Title IX compliance bring their long-term sustainability into question. The concentration of revenue and publicity in these “non-geographic super conferences” intensifies existing Title IX concerns around NIL and revenue sharing. Title IX states "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." Since its signing in 1972, Title IX legislation has been the key component in the development of women's collegiate sports. The current conference realignment pattern runs the risk of pushing Title IX progress in the wrong direction, as explained in a detailed Comment published in the Wisconsin Law Review. In particular, this Comment focuses on how conference realignment amplifies gendered disparities within the NIL system and the soon-to-be implemented revenue-sharing model and the ‘human costs’ of non-geographic conference realignment.

The Department of Education could find that universities' conference realignment actions violate Title IX by disproportionately affecting female athletes, particularly in relation to publicity and NIL opportunities. The regulation requires equal athletic opportunities for both sexes, including access to

publicity resources like media exposure. As stated, “NIL opportunities could fit into the category of ‘other publicity resources’ or ‘other promotional devices,’” ( and conference realignment often results in male athletes receiving more exposure, leading to greater NIL opportunities . This could cause universities to deny female athletes equal access to these resources, violating Title IX’s mandate for equal opportunity outlined in section 106.41. Furthermore, while proponents of realignment argue that third-party NIL sources (like collectives and businesses) may be independent of educational institutions, “NIL sources intertwined with educational institutions have not in fact operated independently from educational institutions.” This suggests that universities, through their realignment decisions, still influence these disparities, despite the involvement of third-party organizations.

**Resolution:**

When considering geographic, human, and economic factors, the current conference realignment pattern is wholly unsustainable. Without a substantial change in structure going forward, college football and olympic sports alike risk massive downturns in the years to come. College football is shifting to resemble a professional league in every aspect, the conference structure and media constructs must adapt as well. With the Big 10 and SEC media contracts expiring in 2030 and 2033 respectively, we suggest a complete detachment of FBS football from the NCAA at the conclusion of these deals. In the current system, conferences have an overpowering amount of leverage, leaving universities forced to make compromises in pursuit of much-needed revenue. Our proposed independent college football league, the ‘Super League’ would split the 134 FBS football teams into three equally sized divisions of ascending prestige. In addition, the ‘Super League’ would adopt a relegation system similar to that of European professional soccer to ensure the competitive tiers of the three divisions are maintained. Media contracts would be negotiated by a central governing body and would vary in value among the three tiers. The large size of each division allows for competition and fragmentation among TV carriers and streaming services and introduces massive scheduling flexibility to further maximize revenue.

The ‘Super League’ introduces opportunities for monetization that reach far beyond the constraints of the current conference system. The top tier division, dominated by former Big Ten and SEC teams, would be highly sought after, with the opportunity to far surpass current Big Ten and SEC contracts. Recent conversations surrounding conference realignment in college football have revealed growing interest from private equity firms. Smash Capital, a firm led by former Disney executives, has proposed “Project Rudy,” a plan to establish a 70-team super league composed of power conference schools. The proposal includes consolidating media rights, eliminating games against lower-tier opponents, expanding the postseason, and introducing a new revenue model projected to generate \$15 billion over 12 years (McDaniel). While our proposed ‘Super League’ has different specifications, ‘Project Rudy’ sheds light on the staggering economic potential of a consolidated college football league.

With the exit of college football, Olympic sports would gain the ability to restore geographic-based conferences, mitigating issues previously discussed surrounding travel. Without football revenue in the equation, there would be no incentive for non-football sports to remain in impractical non-geographic conferences like the Big Ten. Not only would this restoration benefit athlete well-being, but it would cut travel-related expenses incurred by the current non-geographic system, reinstate rivalries that were dissolved in recent realignments, and allow for a more balanced distribution of resources between men’s and women’s sports, minimizing Title IX concerns.

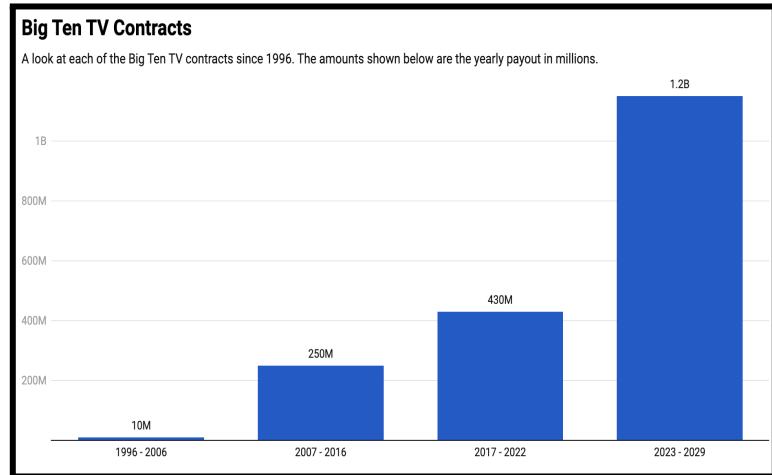
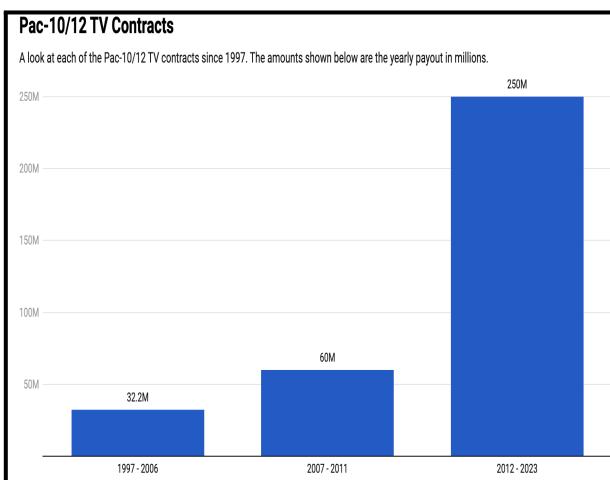
While the ‘Super League’ provides the restructuring necessary to transcend college football and preserve college athletics as a whole, satisfying all parties involved would be particularly challenging. Big Ten and SEC conference commissioners would likely be the most challenging to convince. As the current juggernauts in the conference system, joining the ‘Super League’ would naturally be less appealing. However, the potential for massive media contracts and in the injection of funds by private equity firms makes the consolidation beneficial for all members involved.

Another central concern surrounds the funding of Olympic sports. With the understanding that nearly all non-football sports rely on football revenue, our proposal includes a revenue-sharing

component between the standalone football league and the remaining NCAA-sponsored programs. While critics may argue such an arrangement is one-sided, a college football program without a strong supporting cast of olympic sports behind would inherently be less valuable. UCLA is a prime example of this concept, from rich history and success in basketball, to dominance in men's volleyball and water polo, to massive popularity in gymnastics, the interconnected prestige supports the image of the both the football program and the entirety of the athletic department, boosting the likeness of the university as a whole. The 'Super League' will have the financial capability to simultaneously bolster Olympic sports and transcend college football.

If collegiate football follows its current trajectory, conference realignment will lead to division and disparity among conferences, universities, and athletes. In an overwhelmingly commercialized environment, an independent college football league has the potential to reverse this division, restoring tradition and integrity to college athletics in the future.

## Exhibit 1: Media Revenue: Pac-12 and Big Ten



## Exhibit 2: Power 5 Projected Payouts through 2029

Reworked Navigate Research Projected Payout Per Team: P5					
Year	Big Ten (add USC/UCLA '24)	PAC12 (USC/UCLA exit '24)	Big 12 (OU/UT exit '25; BYU/Cincy/UH/UCF enter '23)	SEC (OU/UT enter '25)	ACC
2022	\$57.2	\$34.4	\$40.6	\$54.3	\$30.9
2023	\$58.9	\$35.5	\$41.8	\$56.0	\$36.3
2024	\$76.2	\$24.2	\$43.1	\$57.6	\$37.9
2025	\$80.2	\$28.1	\$44.3	\$74.9	\$39.6
2026	\$100.3	\$38.0	\$52.6	\$107.8	\$54.3
2027	\$103.4	\$39.1	\$54.2	\$111.0	\$56.6
2028	\$106.5	\$40.3	\$55.8	\$114.4	\$59.0
2029	\$109.7	\$41.4	\$57.5	\$117.8	\$61.5

## Exhibit 3: UCLA Revenues: 2019-2020 and 2020-2021



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