

# Athletic Conference Considerations for Adding New Sports

Sloane Milstein<sup>1</sup>, Julie Lanzillo<sup>2</sup>, and Zack Damon<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Colorado Mesa University

<sup>2</sup>Neumann University

<sup>3</sup>Texas Tech University

COVID-19 has impacted the sport industry across all contexts, including intercollegiate athletics. Specifically, research has found that the Collegiate Sport Addition Process (CSAP) to add or remove a sport for athletic departments in previous economic downturns must consider multiple factors. The current study builds on previous research by exploring the considerations of adding a sport through a buyer-seller interaction framework. Specifically, the current study explored whether sport governing bodies or coaching associations should attempt to sell their sport at the intercollegiate Conference level, rather than at the institution level. The current study used a survey to collect feedback from conference commissioners across the intercollegiate sport landscape. Through surveys and follow-up interviews, findings led to emergent themes of balance, viability, funding and revenue, and post-season opportunities as factors that conference personnel considered when deciding to add a sport. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* intercollegiate athletics, college sport addition, decision-making

## Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the face of sports like no other time in history. Higher education institutions have made significant changes to their athletic departments, eliminating over 206 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) programs across all divisions (NCAA.org), citing direct or indirect financial ramifications (Dellenger & Forde, 2020; Uhler, 2020). While some have reduced their sports offerings, others have made dramatic conference moves intended to increase the athletic department's bottom line. The following is an example of one such change: The Texas Longhorns and Oklahoma Sooners ended their time in the Big 12 and are heading to the SEC in a rich get richer tactic. "It made sense that the Longhorns and the Sooners would align with the other titanic brands of college football" (Daniel et al., 2021).

In addition to moves on behalf of football, Table 1 below highlights several conference movements in both sports and member expansion that appear to be focused on non-revenue-generating sports:



**Table 1**  
*Summary of Conference Movement*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Conference</b>	<b>Association &amp; Division</b>	<b>Sport or Member Expansion</b>
2023	Northeast Conference	NCAA D1	Added Men's Volleyball
2022	Southeastern Conference	NCAA D1	Adding Texas and Oklahoma from the Big 12 in 2025 (anticipated)
2022	Big 10 Conference	NCAA D1	Adding USC and UCLA from the Pac 12 Conference in 2024 (anticipated)
2021	American Athletic Conference	NCAA D1	Added 6 Conference USA schools
2021	Conference Carolinas	NCAA D2	Extends Collaboration with South Atlantic Conference
2021	New England Collegiate Conference	NCAA D3	Added ESports
2021	The Wolverine-Hoosier Athletic Conference	NAIA D1	Added ESports
2021	Big 12 Conference	NCAA D1	Adding 4 New Members
2021	Pac 12 Conference	NCAA D1	Taking steps to bolster wrestling membership
2020	Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference	NCAA D2	Added Men's Volleyball
2019	Cascade Collegiate Conference	NAIA D1	Added women's wrestling
2019	The Mid-American Conference	NCAA D1	Expands Wrestling with the addition of seven new affiliate members
2017	The Allegheny Mountain Collegiate Conference	NCAA D3	Added Men's Volleyball

A pattern or trend of adding sports through athletic conference support appears to be emerging. After all,

. . . conferences have immense power with the ability to restructure the state of intercollegiate athletics. With the chance for stability among conference members and the pursuit of even more revenue, conferences look more like high school dating relationships than long-term marriages among institutions with similar academic and athletic goals. Conferences are now the sole negotiators among the purveyors in the media rights market and, thus, have substantial control to manipulate the market. (Dennie, 2011, p. 253)

Whether a conference seeks to increase its revenue or support member institutions' various initiatives, it appears that direct marketing of the sport to the conference may be a valuable strategy. This study considers whether sport governing bodies or coaching associations attempting to have their sport added should be "selling or marketing" to a conference rather than (or in addition to) an individual institution.

### **The College Sport Addition Process**

In 2014, The Collegiate Sport Addition Process (CSAP) emerged from a study designed to understand the factors, priorities, and processes that NCAA Division I Athletic Directors use in the determination to add one or more sports to their institution (Milstein, 2014). There were several themes of the decision-making process identified— *University Viability, Sport Popularity, Association Membership, and Access and Opportunity*. Within the themes were 23 individual factors: Academics, Enrollment Management, Profile of Student-Athlete, Popularity & Marketability Related to Geography, Direct or Indirect Benefits, Alumni, Donor, Community & Sponsor Support, Association Requirements, Association Membership, Compliance Gender Equity and Access and Opportunity, Competitiveness of the Sport, Popularity for Recruiting, Good Fit, Recruiting, Add-on to an Existing Sport and Sport Popularity, grouped under the emergent themes of University Viability, Association Membership, Access and Opportunity, and Sport Popularity (Milstein, 2014).

Association requirements were listed as the single most discussed theme in the initial study, which was not surprising since the study was conducted at the end of 2014 as institutions concluded their realignment moves. Results highlighted the priority themes, including conference requirements, conference alignment, and NCAA divisional sport status change. Between 2010 and 2013, 120 institutions moved to new conferences, resulting in significant changes in the intercollegiate landscape (Milstein, 2014). Participants in this study that were involved in the conference realignment anticipated enrollment increases as one of the significant changes to their institutions. Furthermore, those that did not cite academics discussed switching conferences to have more schools in their region to compete against, which resulted in the added benefit of lower travel costs (Havard & Eddy, 2013). Conference realignment was promoted to get the universities academically aligned. Nwosu (2015) described academic alignment as *academic prestige*, which refers to the overall ac-

ademic profile of an athletic conference. This is a construct of the academic profiles of the conference member institutions (Nwosu, 2015).

Milstein and Dixon (2019) looked at how and why some sports organizations successfully had their sport added while others struggled. The 2019 study's findings point to a marketing mismatch between what the institution (buyer) is looking for in a sport and what the sport's governing body (seller) is promoting. For example, it was not enough for a sport seller to try to market their sport as being a fix for a Title IX compliance issue. Buyers were aware that women's sports would help with Title IX and wanted to know how else the sport could benefit the institution.

The present study provides a deeper dive into the priority theme of Association Membership, attempting to extend that line of research and consider what factors would make a sport attractive and useful to an entire conference and member institutions alike. The current study will build on previous research in intercollegiate sports realignment and navigating the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) landscape (Petersen & Judge, 2021), reflecting on the five utilities of the sport product within the buy-seller mismatch framework. Additionally, the current work will add to the sports development area (Mullin et al., 2014; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Specifically, the current study relates to the college level sports development area and its dynamic landscape seen with the current changes in college sports. Further, the current research will continue to build on examining the processes and factors involved in adding a sport (Milstein & Damon, 2021; Milstein & Dixon, 2019). With the framework in place, the current study specifically aims to enrich the association membership theme discovered by Milstein & Dixon (2019) to explore the factors that make a sport attractive and useful to a college conference and its member institutions. The association membership theme was defined to describe when a university strategically adds a sport to then change conferences or association levels (Milstein & Dixon, 2019). Whereas the previous work exploring the association membership theme was aimed at what sports an institution may add, the current study adds to the theme by exploring what sports a conference adds. This study expands the buy-seller framework but focuses on the utilities (Sheth, 1976) of the framework given the emphasis on conferences. This framework led us to explore whether sports governing bodies and coaches' associations (sellers) should sell their sport to a conference or member institution (buyers) and what mismatches may occur during the process. To guide our research, we constructed the following overarching research question: What factors do athletic conferences consider when adding a new sport?

## Literature Review and Historic Context

Collegiate athletic conferences have a history that dates back over 100 years, and one that includes divergent rationales for their original creation.

Universities pioneered football, the prototypical collegiate sport, in the late 1800s, before prominent scandals inspired diverse attempts at reform at the turn of the century. Most notably, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) formed in New York City in 1905–6 and promptly suggested

new rules for football. Meanwhile, college officials created regional conferences. The Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives—formed in Chicago in the 1890s and now called the Big Ten—is considered the first intercollegiate athletic conference, the prototype for the big-time conference (Soleburg, 2018).

Initially managed by students, today's collegiate athletic conferences have been established to organize and regulate competition for higher education institutions (Perline et al., 2012). Conferences “establish rules and regulations that support and sustain a level playing field for member institutions, while creating in-season and post-season competitive opportunities” (Staurowsky & Abney, 2011, p. 149) and competitive balance (Rhoads, 2004). Memberships are sought after based on enrollment, geography, academic orientation, athletic department philosophy, division, and revenue-sharing potential (Lopiano & Zotos, 2022). For competition to occur, a level of profitability for conference members must exist (Depken & Wilson, 2006). This is achieved “. . . by distributing rights fees from media agreements, corporate sponsorships, licensing, and other forms of revenue received by the league (Grant et al., 2008). Schools initially competed in the “University Division,” currently known as Division I, and the “College Division,” (now Division II and III). In 1973, the NCAA split into today's Division I, Division II, and Division III. Then, in 1978, the NCAA split Division I into I-A and I-AA (NCAA, n.d.).

### **Conference Realignment—A Shift in Perspective**

Conference realignment refers to sizeable changes in NCAA conference membership and, since 1936, there has been at least one change annually with only a few years with no moves: 1955, 1958, 1985, 2006, and 2010. At most institutions, realignment was being driven primarily by university administrators who saw an opportunity to improve the academic image of their schools. It was not driven by athletic directors as originally thought (Forde, 2010). In addition to academic alignment, there was an expectation that member institutions would also see an increase in revenues through broadcasting, ticket sales, and support through donations. However, any time athletics and academics are discussed together, a debate ensues.

Academically speaking, current research suggests that switching conferences leads to academic gains. On average, colleges that moved to a new league saw a 3% decrease in the admittance rate (meaning they became more selective) and a 5% increase in their admission yield rate (more admitted students enrolled) three years after joining the new conference (Havard & Eddy, 2013).

### ***Opportunity to Renegotiate Broadcasting***

Several conferences now have their own broadcasting networks as they moved from cable to streaming services. For example,

The schools within the three conferences [Big Ten, Pac 12, ACC] believe they are like-minded in that they want to continue to prioritize broad-based sports offerings and, that the academic profile of their institutions matters — as does graduating athletes. One driving force behind the alliance for

(any) two conferences is a concern that ESPN controls and dictates too much of the sport (The Athletic.com, 2021).

The timing of this announcement had many wondering if this was a reaction to Oklahoma and Texas leaving the Big 12. However, if social media has also taught anything, it is that viewers now expect on-demand and customized experiences (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2018). Sports fans have likely ended their days of endless channel surfing. Other concerns are highlighted by the advances in new media, technology, and revenue stream options and opportunities (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2018).

### ***Competition On and Off the Field***

It should be noted that like-minded conference members compete on and off the field for wins, media attention, enrollment, staff, revenues, and resources (Covell & Barr, 2010). Identifying like-minded peers who can be trusted to act in a like-minded manner is challenging (Oriard, 2009). For many institutions, a change in conference caused increases in spatial characteristics, travel distances, and financial commitments (Covell & Barr, 2010). Increased financial investments in athletics and its fans often come at the expense of student-athletes who miss classes and academic obligations.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### **Buyer-Seller Interaction: A Conceptual Framework**

As noted earlier, the current study aims to provide greater depth of understanding into the Association Membership theme; with an aim to explore what factors make a sport attractive to an entire conference and its member institutions. Previous research (Milstein & Dixon, 2019) invoked a buyer (individual university) and seller (governing body or coaching association) relationship when exploring what factors are essential in the decision-making process at the NCAA Division I level to add a sport. While such previous work is a foundation for the current research in that we draw on the relationship between a sport and intercollegiate entities, here we focus on the conference and sport potential relationship. As such, we focus on the utility framework of a product's offering rather than the buyer and seller framework of previous research (Milstein & Dixon, 2019). Sheth (1976) noted that a product can be broken down into five different utilities: functional utility, social-organizational utility, situational utility, emotional utility, and curiosity utility. We position the sport being offered to intercollegiate conferences as the product. Further description of the five utilities follows with an example of how a sport can fit into each utility.

### **Utility**

The first of the five utilities mentioned by Sheth (1976) is the functional utility. The functional utility relates to the values of the product, including product-specific features, measurable qualities, and other outcomes related to the functions of the product (Sheth, 1983). In sports, *functional utility* refers to a sport's function or value at a university (Milstein & Dixon, 2019). The functional utility of a sport may

then impact the outcomes of increased enrollment, raising the brand and perceived prestige of the university, increased broadcasting opportunities, and greater revenue. Next is the *social-organizational utility*, which deals with other non-functionally related values with which the product may imbue and be associated. Such values may include demographic and cultural groups, perceived financial well-being or socioeconomic status, and overall organizational image (Sheth 1976, 1983). This relates to the sport itself fitting in with the university brand and identity. The sport's social-organizational utility has been seen with decisions related to gender representation in intercollegiate sports offerings through Title IX and other means and increasing awareness and representation of diverse racial groups.

Next, *situational utility* pertains to an unplanned need and the related transaction or action to address the unplanned need (Sheth, 1976). Recently, the sports landscape has been littered with numerous unplanned needs, particularly at the college level, as decisions are made to add or drop a sport (Milstein & Damon, 2021; Milstein & Dixon, 2019). Additionally, conference realignment and the 2021 NIL legislation (Petersen & Judge, 2021) represent unplanned needs that have required action from universities, specifically their athletic departments and leaders, through situational utility. Indeed, Petersen and Judge (2021) point to these two phenomena as key situations that will cause university athletic departments to reevaluate their inter-departmental competition across institutions as it relates to recruiting student-athletes and deciding which conference to align their athletic programs within. This situational utility is also an ample example of emotional utility. *Emotional utility* is based on an attachment to a specific product or event and can elicit an emotional response to the product (Sheth, 1976); for example, capturing strong feelings after an event and attempting to persuade people to act in a certain way while the strong feelings persist. The NIL legislation has been an emotional situation with college athletic departments and the student-athletes' brand as the product. Consumers, specifically fans, have engaged in an emotional response as their programs have been helped or hurt by the passing of NIL, allowing for programs to facilitate competitive NIL deals in an attempt to sway potential student-athletes into choosing to attend a specific college and athletic program (Petersen & Judge, 2021). Another sports-related example of emotional utility is when a niche sport becomes popularized through success on a large stage, such as at the Olympics (Milstein & Dixon, 2019). It endears an emotional response for brief periods following the Olympics. An example of this was after the U.S. men's curling team won gold at the 2018 Olympics, and the subsequent fanfare for the team and the sport of curling that ensued.

Finally, *curiosity utility* insinuates an exploratory approach to acquiring the newest, latest, and greatest product simply because it is the newest, latest, and greatest (Sheth, 1976). A simple example of the curiosity utility in sports would be a school adding an emerging sport, such as ESports, in recent years. With all five utilities defined and connected to the sport context, the following research question guided our study to achieve the purpose: What factors do athletic conferences consider when adding a new sport? This research question and our framework informed our survey instrument, detailed in the methods below.



## Methods

### Procedure

This study was an extension of the College Sport Addition Process (CSAP) Model to explore the Association Membership Theme. During the initial 2014 study participants mentioned adding a sport as a result or a requirement of conference membership. The purpose of this inquiry was to generate an in-depth understanding of the factors, priorities and processes pertaining to the decision to add a sport to an NCAA Conference. The research instrument followed the CSAP interview protocol focused on factors and decision making and was adapted into a survey format. For example, the initial protocol asked which sports had been added or dropped for an individual institution, while this study asked the same question but focused on the conference as a whole. The survey provided the “what”, however the interviews assisted in answering the “why”. Interview questions were open-ended, and often started with participants being asked to provide an overview of what sports were added to their conference and why the membership chose to add that sport. From participant’s survey results, questions about Automatic Qualifiers, Associate Memberships, and Single Sport Conferences were asked to provide context associated with their individual conference.

Prior to survey distribution, the instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts, including collegiate athletic administrators whom a conference office had previously employed. Following Institutional Review Board approval, this study was conducted via survey methodology with a sample database comprised of the names and email addresses of the commissioners of each conference within all three divisions of the NCAA. The contact information was obtained from the official website for each conference.

The Qualtrics platform was used, and the survey was available for 49 days. For all survey items, respondents were permitted to skip questions. Of the eight participants who agreed to follow-up interviews, three meetings were scheduled with commissioners representing one of the NCAA divisions. In follow-up interviews, the researchers sought insight into the survey data collected, which revealed consistency and thematic clarification.

### Participants

This study sought to obtain feedback from the collegiate athletic conferences that were affiliates of the NCAA (NCAA, 2020) as of the 2020-2021 academic year. Participants were identified through their member conferences listed on the [ncaa.org](http://ncaa.org) website. An initial survey was sent via email to the commissioners of each NCAA conference ( $N = 97$ ). After a review of the responses, a second request was resent to 17 conferences to seek varied representation in the regions and divisions. Ultimately, 27 conference commissioners responded, with 25 completed surveys for a response rate of 92.59%. Eight respondents agreed to a follow-up interview. The distribution of respondents with usable surveys is reflected in Table 2. Regions were established



using criteria from the U.S. Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

**Table 2**  
*Participants by Region*

Region	Division I	Division II	Division III
Region I: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont	0	1	2
Region II: New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands	1	1	1
Region III: Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia	0	1	5
Region IV: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee	1	3	1
Region V: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Wisconsin	1	0	2
Region VI: Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas	0	0	0
Region VII: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska	0	1	0
Region VIII: Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming	0	1	0
Region IX: Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada (American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands)	1	1	0
Region X: Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington	1	0	0

### **Study Design Rationale**

The initial survey design allowed the researchers to gain insight from the conference commissioners related to the specifics of their conference structure and recent activity concerning the addition or termination of sports. Follow-up interviews with willing participants enabled the researchers to elicit emic from the respondents (Sirahkaya-Turk et al., 2017), thereby understanding the ways process by which college conferences contribute to the sport addition process at their member schools.

### **Peer Debriefing and Inter-rater Agreement**

Multiple qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Weiss, 1994) suggest the practice of peer debrief-

ing to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. Each of the researchers reviewed the survey results individually and then discussed their interpretations. Two initial researchers designed the study, and a third joined to contribute to peer debriefing. According to Spall (1998), peer debriefing supports the credibility of the research findings and can contribute to the overall trustworthiness of the research. At different times during the research process, these individuals were contacted to review the data and the findings and discuss the implications. These individuals helped explain terminology in the context of the results.

## Findings and Discussion

This study sought to better understand the role of the collegiate conference in the decision-making process when member schools decide to add or delete a sport. This study specifically addressed what factors should be considered or prioritized if a sports governing body or coaching association desires to sell or market its sport to an entire conference. While the results varied, several themes emerged, and are discussed below. Survey results and follow-up clarifications are provided. Results are accompanied by a discussion using Sheth's Utility Framework to consider what adding a sport can provide an athletic conference. Quotes from respondents are provided to give voice and context to these results.

### Sport Adoption by Participating Conferences

Of the 27 participants, 10 conferences indicated that they had added a sport in the last three years (2018-2021) or would be adding one during the next three years (2021-2024). Eight indicated that they had not added a sport in the past few years or were not planning to add one. Another seven did not respond. Below, Table 3 provides a list of sports that were included in the addition by participants in this study.

### Membership Driven

Athletic conferences are member-driven; therefore, data collected and reported results have a direct throughline from institution to conference. As membership changed and individual institutions adopted sports, a request to add a specific sport to the conference would usually come up for discussion. For example, men's wrestling has been a sport that has had a rocky road. Having been eliminated from numerous institutions in the past few decades, Division II and Midwest conferences have taken most recent ownership of the sport as noted below by the Mid America Conference expanding their wrestling offerings and Big 10 dominance in the sport (Couch, 2015, Simon, 2006). According to the National Wrestling Coaches Association, on the women's side, wrestling became an NCAA emerging sport and is now considered one of the fastest-growing sports for women in both high school and collegiate arenas.(Weiman, 2022). From individual conference press releases announcing the addition of a wrestling has been noted below.

- 2023: Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference has announced the adoption of women's wrestling as the 22nd conference-sponsored sport (RMAC announces, 2023, para 1).

**Table 3**  
*Sports Included*

<b>Adding Men's Sport(s) 2021-2024</b>	<b>Number of Conferences Adding</b>	<b>Adding Women's Sport(s) 2021-2024</b>	<b>Number of Conferences Adding</b>
Men's Lacrosse	2	Women's Ice Hockey	1
Men's Swimming & Diving	2	Women's Lacrosse	2
Men's Volleyball	1	Women's Lacrosse	1
Men's Wrestling	2	Women's Field Hockey	1
Men's Football	1	Women's Indoor Track and Field	1
Men's Indoor Track and Field	1	Women's Swimming & Diving	2
<b>Number of Conferences Adding</b>		<b>Mixed Sport</b>	
			1
<b>Total Additions</b>			<b>18</b>

- 2021: Pac-12 Conference announces a series of steps to bolster wrestling membership (ac-12 Conference announces, 2021);
- 2019: National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) Cascade Collegiate Conference has added women's wrestling NAIA votes to adopt , (2022);
- 2019: The Mid-American Conference (MAC) announced expansion in the sport of wrestling as the MAC has added seven new affiliate members. The addition of seven new affiliate members increases MAC wrestling membership to 15 total members.  
 "Our membership spent significant time discussing and studying the possible inclusion of these new members and we believe this will strengthen what has already grown into an elite wrestling league," said Dr. Jon A. Steinbrecher, Commissioner of the Mid-American Conference. "This addition of affiliate members is good for the Mid-American Conference, and good for collegiate wrestling. It broadens our footprint across a part of the country where youth, high school, and collegiate wrestling is very strong" (Leisering, 2019, para 7)

From the voices of this study's participants, the following quotes demonstrate how members drive the conference:

[Membership Sustainability]. Football expansion plans include initiating football based on the need to build a strong sustainable membership for the future. We initiated women's lacrosse, followed by men's lacrosse – which

subsequently was transferred to another conference. We now are starting men's lacrosse again as a service to the marketplace which held multiple independent programs that needed a conference home (Respondent # 10).

[Required Roster Numbers]. Any sport expansion is directly related to sports sponsorship opportunities by full members with affiliate members used to reach a minimum number of six (Respondent # 21).

[Sport Adoption]. As a conference, we sponsor a sport if at least five of our members sponsor the sport. Conferences at DIII typically sponsor sports based on their membership. Almost all will have some sort of threshold to offer a conference championship/conference play or not. We don't make decisions on sponsoring sports on our own. We as a conference also don't require teams to sponsor any specific sports. Our policy is that you need at least seven sports per gender, at least six of which need to be sports in the North Coast Athletic Conference (NCAC) - which is to say sports sponsored by other NCAC members (Respondent #3).

[Member Led]. Simply put. . . It's a ground up movement in either direction. Momentum from a group of members typically leads to the addition or elimination of a sport at the conference level (Respondent #18).

[Decision to Add]. We had enough schools participating to sponsor the sport at the championship level (Respondent #9).

One institution's press release shows how athletic conferences are influential:

Adding both men's and women's wrestling has been discussed as part of the Lebanon Valley College in Annville's current athletic strategic plan. The biggest challenge, however, is facilities, according to Associate Athletic Director and Senior Women's Administrator Stacey Hollinger. 'Men's and women's wrestling are on the potential list to add to sports in the future,' Hollinger said. 'Our challenge for us right now is we do not have a facility where we can practice, have locker rooms or compete. But it has been talked about, and it has been considered because other teams in our conference have added it, so it is definitely on our radar and part of an athletic strategic plan' (Pawlikowski, 2022, para 4).

### **Emergent Theme: Viability**

Figure 1 shows the emergent themes of *Conference Viability*, *Balance*, *Post Season Opportunities*, and *Funding and Revenue Sources*. Each will be discussed individually, without priority, recognizing that each theme overlaps and affects the other themes. Consistent with the original CSAP, *viability* emerged as a theme in the current study. While it was not surprising to see the viability theme emerge again, our current findings help refine our understanding of this theme and provide further

perspective on how integral it is to decision-makers and participants. Viability revolves around individual institutions' and conferences' growth, development, and continued sustainability. For example, at the institution level, there was evidence to support the notion of recruiting a diverse study body. In contrast, for conferences, there was evidence of communication to the institutions, efforts to sustain membership, sport growth, and marketing initiatives. Further, the participants pointed to financial considerations as part of the viability theme with what the institutions or conferences were willing or able to pay to sustain the sport's growth, marketing, and competitiveness across institutions. Conferences considering the addition of a sport discussed viability in several ways.

**Figure 1**  
*Emergent Themes*



No conference openly stated (in the survey) that a university must add a sport to be part of its conference. However, in follow-up conversations with conference representatives, they discussed supporting existing member institutions by adding a sport to the conference that fulfills the needs of its members. New members were encouraged to add specific sports as incentives to becoming full members. The following quotes from respondents and recent press releases give voice to those sentiments:

[Sustaining Membership]. Conference XYZ added women's lacrosse in the last three years. The conference saw the schools adding the sport and "went out to the schools to say, 'should we add more?' and we sought out new members (Respondent #12).

As noted below, growth was discussed frequently.

[Growth]. Started as a single sport conference, not battling for members but as a pathway. If schools leave, it is ok. There was a deliberate plan to grow and split. The income model comes to \$0 each year. They can go to ESPN, and they can cover individual institutions and not pay high profile conference fees (Respondent #10).

[Growth and Diversity]. Cited from reasons to add the sports was that it was . . . fastest growing collegiate sport in America, [notable] growth in local high schools, . . . opening up new recruiting markets for our institutions (Respondent #8).

[Sport Growth]. Conference Carolinas (SAC), has been collaborating on the addition of the emerging sports women's triathlon and women's wrestling (Naasz, 2021).

We initiated women's lacrosse, followed by men's lacrosse, which subsequently was transferred to another conference. We now are starting men's lacrosse again as a service to the [collegiate] marketplace which held multiple independent programs (athletic teams) that needed a conference home (Respondent #10).

Regarding eliminating a sport, its usefulness by conference members drove decisions. Three participants responded that their conferences would eliminate women's field hockey, men's lacrosse, men's tennis, and women's tennis. As an overarching theme, respondents conveyed that adding (or eliminating) a sport to the official conference offerings is a "ground-up movement," and there was no "official checklist." However, the sentiments expressed in their comments indicate that the conference or membership can and does influence the sport(s) they choose to sponsor.

[Conference Collaboration]. Field hockey was run as an associate sport made up of schools in the two conferences. When the one conference added more programs the obligation to conduct the championship was assumed by that conference. All member schools had access to the championship (Respondent #6).

[Member Interest]. We require a minimum of four members to sponsor a sport before we will consider sponsoring it as a conference championship sport. We had four teams for Men's Lacrosse but then one member discontinued the program, so we did the same as a conference (Respondent #13).

[Institutional Roster Management]. Reduced interest by athletic departments, loss of sponsoring members institutions, including affiliate members, Institutional budget concerns, Collegiate athletic industry/higher ed

growing mentality to sponsor sports with bigger rosters to assist with admission efforts, Fewer competition opportunities within region due to slow elimination of programs making it more costly to compete. (Respondent #18)

Beyond the research instrument, supporting statements for the theme of viability were also noted in press releases. For example, the New England Collegiate Conference (NECC) has added Esports to their conference offerings. While Esports does not fall under NCAA offerings, the member institutions felt that elevating the sport to varsity would assist enrollment for it's member institutions ; according to NECC Commissioner Jacob VanRyn.

We are extremely excited to announce the addition of Esports. Esports is one of the fastest-growing competitive efforts on college campuses, and it is a tremendous opportunity for us to expand the impact of the New England Collegiate Conference beyond traditional sports on campus. We are proud to announce the addition of Esports as an NECC-sponsored sport. We take great pride in all of our sport and championship offerings, and we will continue to do everything we can to help create memorable and meaningful experiences for all of our student-athletes. (NECC, 2019).

The reason for that growth is often attributed to Esports' ability to engage the current student body, attract new students and present a cutting-edge image. For some liberal arts schools, Esports can provide an anchor to new technological programs and help attract a different type of student than the school traditionally lures. With that development potential, student-life departments, in addition to athletics departments, have become involved in starting the programs on many campuses, seeing Esports as part of their school's broader growth strategy (NCAA, n.d.)

### ***Discussion on Utility***

These factors or themes speak to Sheth's (1976) functional utility regarding the product and are limited to performance, measurable qualities, and evaluative criteria. In this case, *functional utility* refers to what function an individual sport could serve at an institution. For example, sports might be seen as a recruiting tool, assisting with enrollment, or providing a pathway to post-season play. When conference decisions are member-driven, and alignment or realignment has brought together like-minded institutions, it is natural that the results discussed here for conferences follow their member institutions. As a service to the marketplace, popular sports in regional high school markets make for good recruiting opportunities for local higher education institutions.

In most cases, the attractiveness of adding a conference sport fulfills multiple needs and might speak to both functional and social utility. In early 2019, the NAIA Cascade Collegiate Conference added women's wrestling. The quote below is from a single-sport conference that will now support two NCAA emerging sports, which points to demographic attractiveness. Whether related to the diversity of race or gender to fulfill athletic goals or enrollment objectives, social outcomes to increase more



women's opportunities are noted in the quote below:

Conference Carolinas Commissioner Chris Colvin said,

We are really excited about the addition of working with the South Athletic Conference (SAC) to administer the emerging sports of women's triathlon and women's wrestling. I know both the Conference Carolinas and South Atlantic Conference student-athletes are thrilled to be able to compete against each other in a conference format that also allows us to help lead the way nationally in promoting the growth of these two sports. (conferencecarolinas.com, 2021, para 3),)

The two conferences will start women's triathlon in the 2022-23 academic year, while women's wrestling will begin in the 2023-24 academic year (Naasz, 2021).

### **Emergent Theme: Balance**

While most industries prefer minimal competition, sports programs can only thrive if they have competition. "Fans want their teams to win, but they also appreciate a level of uncertainty regarding the outcome of a sporting event" (Humphreys, 2002, p.133). Therefore, negatively impacting fan interest may exist without competitive balance within the conference can cause diminished attendance, viewership, and revenue from media rights (Humphreys, 2002; Perline et al., 2018). While professional sports leagues use methods such as salary caps, luxury taxes, and revenue sharing to affect competitive balance, intercollegiate sports use their rules and regulations at the NCAA level and scheduling, budgeting, and membership selection at the conference level to attempt to achieve an appropriate amount of competitive balance (Humphreys, 2002; Perline et al., 2018).

The concept of competitive balance is characterized by a relatively equal opportunity to be competitive with teams that have similar characteristics with regard to athletic competition, facilities, amenities, and finances to support athletic competition (Johnson et al., 2017; Nwosu, 2017). Most conferences exist to provide competitive opportunities for their members. Therefore, some degree of balance must exist for the conference to remain viable and for institutions to keep their membership sports offerings and alumni support. Addressed in the participants' sentiments from the current study was the idea of competitive balance, specifically, travel schedules and "geographic balance." In 2021, the NCAA Division I Pac-12 Conference announced a series of policy changes to increase wrestling membership through affiliate members and provide a geographic balance to support student-athletes and competition in the western part of the United States (Media Center, Pac-12, n.d.). The following participant quotes suggests regional growth could lead to increased opportunities for member institutions potentially adopting the sport.

[Regional Interest]. Member institutions already sponsoring Men's Wrestling have infrastructure in place. (There is) growing interest in the sport, and increased competition opportunities within the region with conference members. (There is a) greater likelihood of a conference championship opportunity as more institutions decide to add the sport. (Respondent #18)

[Financial Consideration]. Field Hockey provided a more regional “better fit” for travel.

(The institutions are) willing to invest in football and basketball travel but count pennies for other sports (Respondent 12).

### ***Discussion on Utility***

Competitive and geographic balance has a direct throughline to the functional utility of facilities and amenities as both are product-specific features with measurable qualities regarding balance. As lacrosse, wrestling, and volleyball are showing up in more high schools, adding a sport to the conference allows for more recruiting opportunities for all member institutions. Increasing recruiting opportunities likely to impact enrollment could be an example of functional utility. Outcomes related to the functions of the product can be viewed through the over-inflated athletic budgets and gross revenues seen at the most prominent Division I Football Subdivision (FBS) Conferences. Geographic balance or geographic proximity is echoed in the sentiments of those scholars reimagining a football realignment:

The COVID-19 pandemic’s effects have been profoundly felt in a realm where, for 10 years, money was no object, and the map made no sense. Slapped in the face by a new fiscal reality, maybe we’re due to both rein in and reach out—to contract geographically into more regional conferences, while expanding the scope of the revenue gusher that is the College Football Playoff (Forde, 2020, para 3).

Beyond football, members with affiliate memberships or which are part of single-sport conferences are often forced into undesirable schedules, connecting to social-organizational utility. Higher-profile sports often have a higher number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who often need additional academic support services to be successful. When individual teams travel further, negative consequences emerge in the form of more expensive and geographically undesirable situations, with student-athletes unable to perform at their athletic and academic peaks. With greater travel distances, students lose access to academic services and can feel pressured to prioritize athletics.

Having a sport be part of the conference, with regional opportunities to compete and the potential to make it to post-season play, will be seen as more attractive compared to participating in a sport where student-athletes must travel far and make additional academic sacrifices. As a positive ramification, this might also result in the retention of student-athletes across the conference who are connected to that sport.

### **Emergent Theme: Post-Season Opportunities**

Most conferences noted that they had a Conference Championship Award: All-Sports, Commissioner’s Cup, President’s Cup Athletic Excellence Award, or similar. These awards serve to recognize athletic excellence within a conference. However, the Automatic Bid or Qualifier (A.Q.) was the single most discussed element of this study. Institutions need more than competitive balance; they want opportunities to

participate in post-season play, with an opportunity to potentially win a national title. Regardless of their regular-season performance, teams that win their conference tournament automatically earn a trip to the NCAA post-season (or championship) tournament. Therefore, when enough member institutions began sponsoring the sport, the conference expanded to provide a pathway to an NCAA tournament. Simply put, “Sufficient number of member institutions began sponsoring the sport,” as indicated by Respondent #12 regarding the addition of women’s lacrosse, men’s wrestling, men’s swimming and diving, women’s field hockey, and women’s swimming and diving to their Conference.

The following quote more fully summarizes this sentiment:

[Automatic Qualifier]. We added men’s volleyball in 2019. We added it as a sport when at least four members sponsored it. Men’s volleyball was growing as an NCAA sport, and it became a Division III championship shortly before we added it as a conference. This was a strong motivating factor for us to add it as a conference sport and seek additional affiliate members so that we could achieve an automatic bid (Respondent #13).

[Single Sport Conference]. Forming a single sport conference, jointly allowed us to have an automatic bid to Championships, which accelerated the growth and development of our programs, primarily through enhanced recruiting. Our agreement called for the partnership to be dissolved once one of our leagues hit the NCAA minimum of seven programs for championship A.Q. status (Respondent #8).

### ***Discussion on Utility***

Automatic qualifiers point to post-season play, which speaks to functional and situational utility. While only one member institution can receive the Automatic Qualifier in a conference, having the opportunity for post-season play brings more media attention, which connects to both conference and institutional marketing initiatives. While obtaining an Automatic Bid is a clear objective for many conferences, there appear to have been strategic initiatives where individual members worked with an affiliate or a single-sport conference until timing or a situation allowed for the conference to fully adopt a new sport. When discussing Automatic Qualifiers, it was often associated with leaving or dissolving a single-sports conference.

A single-sport conference must be comprised of at least seven members. If a single-sport conference is comprised in part of provisional or reclassifying members, the conference must still contain a minimum of four active members. For a single-sport conference in a National Collegiate sport, the minimum number of active institutions is controlled by the number needed for a National Collegiate automatic qualification. Provisional and reclassifying schools may not contribute to the minimum number of active institutions but may be included in the overall conference composition (NCAA Conference Membership, 2023, para 3).

As noted by a joint press release, the Conference Carolinas extended their collab-

oration with the South Atlantic Conference into the sport of women's wrestling in 2021. This single-sport conference now sponsors multiple sports but does so under a single-sport model.

The addition of women's triathlon and women's wrestling also comes with the announcement that the South Atlantic Conference will be the sole sponsor of field hockey starting in the 2022-23 academic year. The two conferences will still administer men's wrestling together until the start of the 2023-24 academic year when both conferences will then solely sponsor the sport (Naasz, 2021, para 2).

With hundreds of sports being eliminated from individual institutions due to the pandemic, the single-sport conference model may become more popular not only with emerging sports looking for pathways to NCAA championships but also with less financially stable sports.

### **Emergent Theme: Funding and Revenue**

At the height of the pandemic, institutions cut sports at an alarming rate. One must spend money to make money, and with programs having less money to work with, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant budget cuts and sports being eliminated, as summed up by the following study participant:

There has been reduced interest by athletic departments, loss of sponsoring members institutions, including affiliate members, institutional budget concerns, collegiate athletic industry, and the higher education growing mentality to sponsor sports with bigger rosters to assist with admission efforts. There are fewer competition opportunities within the region due to slow elimination of programs making it more costly to compete (Respondent #18).

### ***Revenue***

For many, institution-initiated sports eliminations are the reality of the current time, while others see opportunities. Because of, or despite, those cuts, opportunities have materialized for institutions to make a conference move. With dozens of institutions announcing a change of conference between 2022-2025 (Miller, 2022), there can be no question that revenue is the top priority of NCAA Division I athletic conferences and athletic departments (McCullough et al., 2022).

Institutions with significant brand value are highly sought after as members of conferences with the direct impact that they can have on revenue through collective conference streaming and broadcast rights (Smitt, 2022). With the 2021 introduction of NIL statutes at the state level, collegiate student-athletes are now poised to leverage their personal brands for monetary gain. This new intersection has demonstrated that student-athletes may have a highly influential impact on how conferences and universities make decisions concerning sport adaptation and conference realignment as it directly relates to financial viability for all (Christovich, 2022).

For smaller conferences and emerging sports, revenue still matters. Sports with growing popularity and a student-athlete population that has built a strong brand

presence can impact institutional awareness. Student-athletes at NCAA Division II and Division III schools are not as generally sought after as their Division I counterparts, but that does not mean they are not staking a claim to some of the NIL benefits (Christovich, 2021).

**Discussion on Utility.** As branding dictates, the first step is consumer awareness (Rossiter, 2014). Without awareness, the buyer-seller relationship cannot exist (Sheth, 1976). The existence of opportunities for a sport to gain and expand on its consumer awareness, thereby positively impacting revenue generation opportunities, would seem to be a natural desire of the conference, university, and the sport itself. The curiosity utility insinuates an exploratory approach to acquiring the newest, latest, and greatest product simply because it is the newest, latest, and greatest (Sheth, 1976). From traditional sponsorships to digital collectibles like Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), athletes are considering schools that offer stronger opportunities for NIL revenue (Drew, 2022). With NIL in its infancy and student-athletes gaining opportunities, institutions and conferences are experiencing this phenomenon in real-time, each determining how the short-term and long-term effects will play out.

While the impact is still unknown, it is plausible to think that high school students benefiting from NIL legislation will impact the collegiate level, leading the discussion to a situational and functional utility. “College football has completely changed from what it was a year and a half ago,” Scott said. “Then, it was about facilities. Now, it’s completely different. The No. 1 factor that determines your future success in bringing in talented players and retaining them, the very No. 1 factor, is your NIL ability, bottom line” (Zier, 2022, para 2).

### **Funding**

Grant initiatives have been in place for approximately a decade, as seen with the case of the NCAA emerging sport of women’s triathlon. While emerging sports move towards full NCAA Championship status, they often must operate as single-sport conferences, determining rules, recruiting new members, organizing competitions, and assisting with funding.

[Triathlon]. To assist with this monumental opportunity, USA Triathlon announced the USA Triathlon Foundation Women’s Triathlon Emerging Sport Grant. The first round of funding was \$2.6 million and then an additional \$895,000 was approved; this totals roughly \$3.5 million. This grant is distributed to selected NCAA membership institutions to develop, implement, grow and sustain varsity women’s triathlon programs at the NCAA level. (Women’s Triathlon Grant, TeamUSA.org, n.d.).

Early in 2022, with National Governing Body grant assistance, women’s triathlon has now had its 40<sup>th</sup> institution sign on to add the sport, allowing them to request and move to full-sponsored NCAA championship status just in time to meet the 10-year deadline. It is assumed by the volume of schools that applied and were sustained by the grants that this method likely worked for sports addition. Except for women’s equestrian, whose conferences might hold more power, other emerging sports that did not meet the 10-year mark did not fare so well. Archery, badminton, team

handball, and synchronized swimming could not meet the NCAA's requirements to become championship sports and thus were dropped.

**Discussion on Utility.** While sports expansion is at the heart of the grant, the utility framework points out both a situational and social organizational connection since grants are not offered in most sports. The previous example of women's triathlon and the next example of men's volleyball are aimed at expanding opportunities for a minority population. In 2016, First Point Volleyball Foundation started offering grants in an attempt to revitalize men's volleyball. Then, in 2019, it partnered with the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC) and associated Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) by providing a one-million-dollar grant to help six SIAC schools start varsity men's volleyball programs. Each of the six historically Black schools will receive \$150,000 over three years, and the conference office will receive \$100,000 to help conduct a league championship. For the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, such efforts have come due to a \$1 million grant from USA Volleyball and the First Point Volleyball Foundation. The conference used the funds to start men's volleyball programs at Central State (Ohio), Benedict, Fort Valley State, Kentucky State, Morehouse, and Paine in the 2020-21 academic year (NCAA).

The introduction of men's volleyball to HBCUs is just one phase of an effort to simultaneously bring the sport to underserved communities and build the pipeline of talent. It was the brainchild of Team USA men's coach John Speraw, who also heads UCLA's program, but it required buy-in from Moore, the SIAC commissioner. (Gold, 2022, para. 3).

Highlighted here are new diverse populations to be recruited, enrolled, and provided educational opportunities while also allowing for an increase in broadcasting as the conference and member institutions enter new markets.

## Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, there are limitations to the current study that need to be acknowledged. First, although we captured a variety of responses from most U.S. regions, region VI (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) were not captured in our responses and thus constrained how our findings may apply to schools in this region. A follow-up study aimed at conferences in this region would do well to capture this data point. A second limitation is that while we were able to capture interviews with eight participants of a limited population, further insights from other qualitative interviews may help to identify more emergent themes or additional information to enrich the current themes. As data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, future research may glean more insights through qualitative interviews with a larger number of respondents as society and conference commissioners emerge from the chaotic pandemic period. Finally, data were collected before the ongoing conference shuffle seen in 2022, limiting the current study's impact and ability to capture these changes. As we noted earlier, the athletic conferences are member-driven. As members continue to move or attempt to move from one confer-

ence to another, this will have the potential to change what sports will be requested to be added as institutions continue to change conferences. Future research can use the current study as a foundation to build on and capture the continued changes seen across NCAA member institutions and conferences through the realignment phenomenon.

## Conclusion

The current study aimed to understand the role of the collegiate conference in the decision-making process for how schools determine whether to add or remove a sport. Based on the survey method, we found evidence of four main themes: conference viability; balance; post-season opportunities; and budgeting, funding, and revenue sources. These themes provide additional understanding of Sheth's (1976) Utility Framework applied to intercollegiate athletics. The themes also enlighten further understanding of the buyer-seller relationship (Milstein & Dixon, 2019) and leaders' decision-making processes (Milstein & Damon, 2021) in athletic departments and conferences.

With our emergent themes expanding on previous research, the current study offers insights and guidance for administrators when considering adding or removing a sport from an athletic conference. We aim to invite other scholars to continue the evolution of the research stream centered on adding or removing a sport and the various factors influencing the decision-making process. The current work stands as a resource for both practitioners and academics alike.

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