



CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

2024 CRIA Conference Realignment and Regionalization Report Media Contacts:

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The Impact of Coast-to-Coast Conferences and Why a Return to Regionalization Matters

Historically, conferences consisted of institutions that were geographically proximate and shared similar values. This regional alignment helped institutions manage travel costs, as conference members were often located just a few hours or states apart. Over the past three decades, however, institutions have increasingly prioritized other goals when realigning conferences—chiefly, maximizing revenue and exposure for their football and men's basketball programs. As revenue in collegiate athletics has surged, the financial allure of conference realignment has intensified. In the summer of 2023, these shifts led to the collapse of the century-old Pac-12, the only Power 5 conference on the West Coast. The conference disintegrated as ten member-schools chose to join other conferences across the country. Notably, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) expanded by inviting Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley—both former Pac-12 members—along with Southern Methodist University. This realignment brought two West Coast institutions into a conference previously comprised entirely of East Coast schools. To that end, we explored **how the Atlantic Coast Conference's conference realignment decisions impact athletes' travel and academic experience.**

This research highlights the significant contrast in travel demands between a coast-to-coast conference and a hypothetical regional conference. College athletes in national conferences face far greater travel distances compared to those in a regional setup. A return to regionalism would demonstrate a renewed commitment to athletes' physical and mental well-being while also reducing travel-related costs for athletic departments.

Background

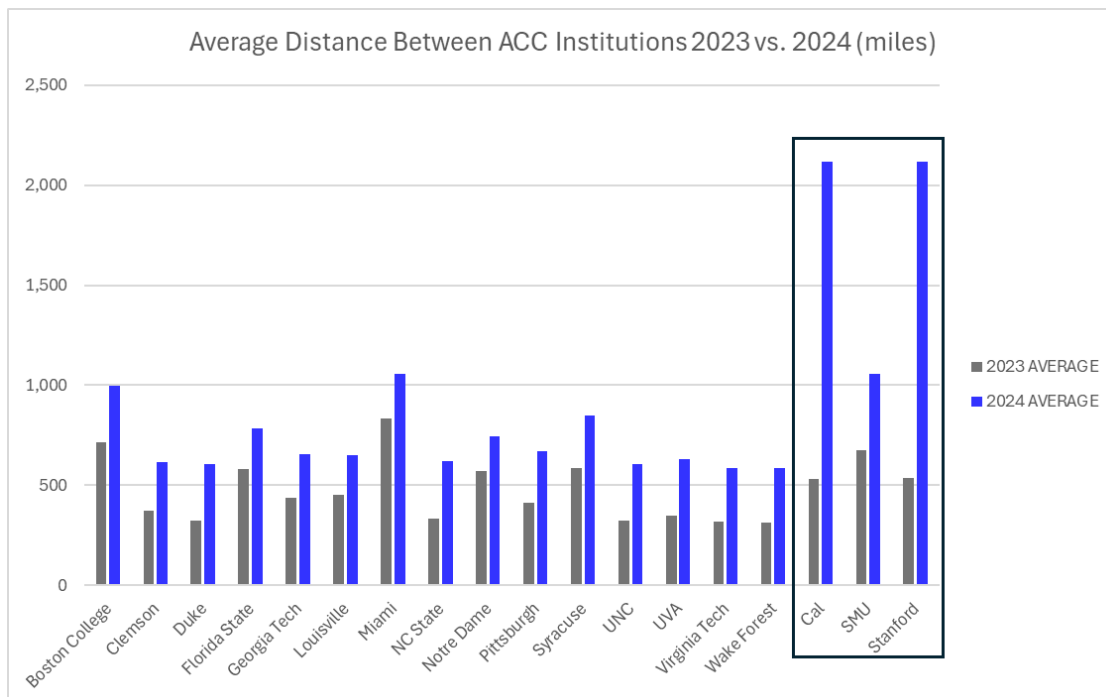
In 1984, the Supreme Court ruled the NCAA violated the Sherman Act, the primary law governing antitrust issues. The Act prohibits agreements that restrain commerce.¹ This decision allowed schools to take control of their television rights and negotiate broadcasting contracts independent of the NCAA.²

Conferences became the primary negotiators of television deals unless a university operated independently.³ Between 1997 and 2013, 78 programs moved conferences, some more than once.⁴ Joining more powerful conferences offered the chance for greater television revenues, which increased institutional exposure and became a major funding source.⁵ Over the next thirty years, realignment yielded five dominant conferences: the ACC, Big 12, Big Ten, Pac-12, and SEC, collectively known as the Power 5. By 2023, the median public schools in these conferences received approximately 40% of their revenue from media rights.⁶

In the wake of the 2023 realignment that dismantled the Pac-12, three of the four remaining Power 5 conferences require cross-country travel for conference competition. As a result, college athletes frequently travel long distances to compete, a stark contrast to the regional conference model that was still common in the 1990s.

Quantitative Findings

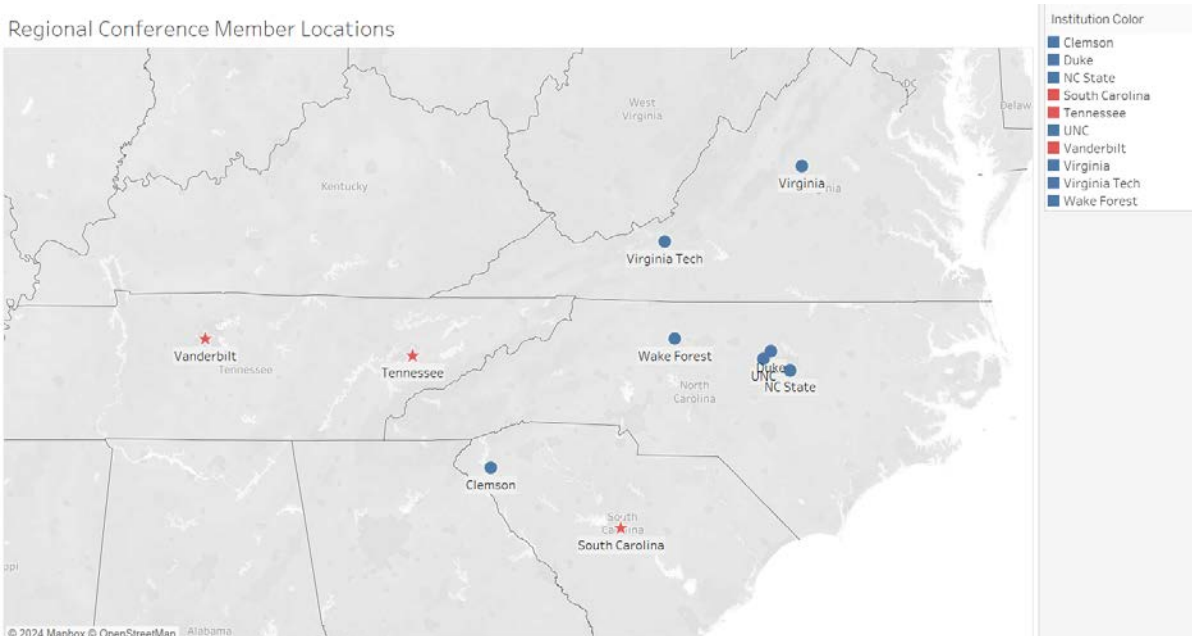
Using the locations of each ACC institution, the researcher identified how far the schools would have traveled to reach all the other conference institutions before and after conference realignment. The graph below demonstrates the tremendous increase in the distance schools travel in the new conference. For example, UNC athletes will see their average rise by almost 300 miles to 607 miles this year. Both Cal-Berkeley and Stanford add nearly 1,500 miles to their average travel distance. The added distance is a clear quantitative indicator of the coast-to-coast conference effects on athletes which disrupt circadian rhythms and cause trip-related fatigue and time-zone desynchronization.⁷ Recovery typically takes one day per time zone crossed, meaning athletes traveling from Boston to San Francisco, for example, compete while still adjusting to the new time zone and return to class without fully recovering.



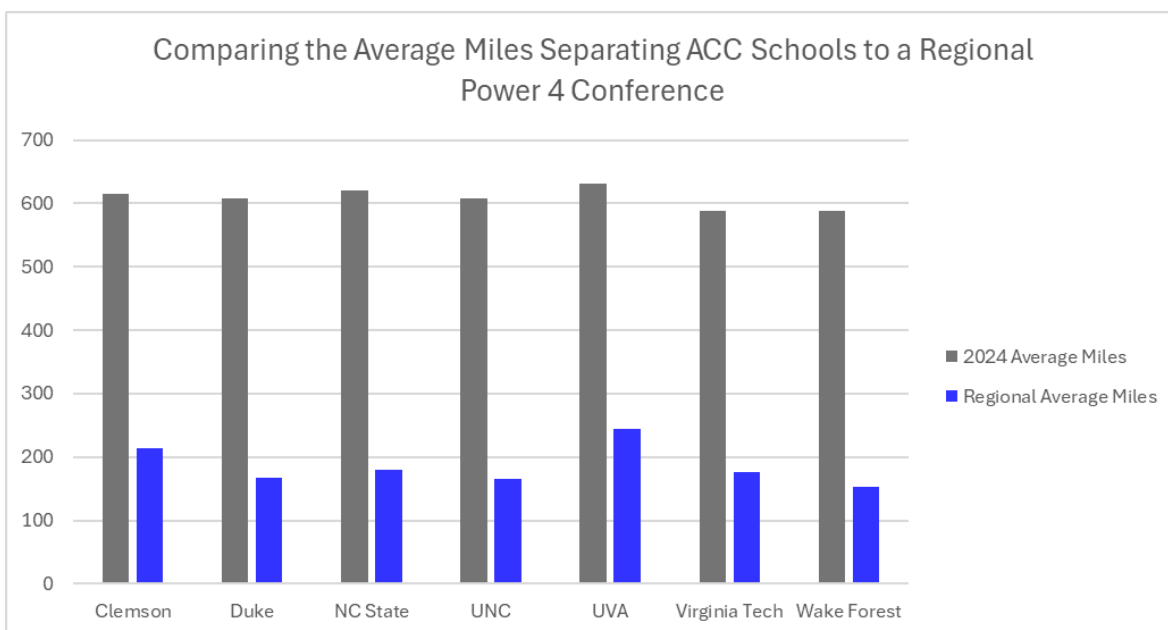
Return to Regionalism:

There are noted challenges related to a growing wave of cross-country conference realignment, particularly for college athletes. The ACC has grown from a conference concentrated in the southeastern United States in the 1990s, to a conference stretching from the southern East Coast to the northern East Coast, and finally to a conference stretching from the Atlantic to Pacific Ocean. The distance encourages existing tensions between an athlete's academic and athletic obligations as shown by research into the academic and physical well-being of college athletes. Subsequently, schools can reduce this tension by reducing the travel burdens athletes face by regionalizing their conferences for Olympic sports. For example, a new hypothetical regional conference (the Appalachian Mountain Conference (AMC) could be created using seven current ACC schools and adding three SEC institutions.

Regional Conference Member Locations



In this conference, athletes would not travel more than a few hours away from campus by bus or plane, reducing their time away from campus. Each current ACC school included in this hypothetical conference would see at least a 50% decrease in the average miles traveled to reach each institution.



It has become all too common to read about athletic administrators bemoaning a new era of college sports. Whether it is the new shift to athlete revenue sharing or employee status, these are seen as harbingers of doom in college athletics. Meanwhile, we continue to engage in conference realignment decisions that only compound the pressures and expectations facing college athletes. If institutions are serious about preserving the academic experience for college athletes, a return to regionalization is the first step in making that change. As the pressures and expectations for college athletes mount, it is worth considering how institutions can still preserve the academic experience for athletes.

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- ¹ Sherman Anti-Trust Act (1890) (2021). <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/sherman-anti-trust-act>.
- ² Stevens, John Paul. “NATIONAL COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION, Petitioner v. BOARD OF REGENTS OF the UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA and University of Georgia Athletic Association.” LII / Legal Information Institute, June 27, 1984. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/468/85>.
- ³ Maisel, Ivan. “SEC OFFICIALLY LEAVES CFA; BIG EAST WILL FOLLOW SOON.” Deseret News, January 24, 2024. <https://www.deseret.com/1994/2/12/19091453/sec-officially-leaves-cfa-big-east-will-follow-soon/>; Reed, William F. “All Shook Up.” Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com. Accessed September 17, 2023. <https://vault.si.com/vault/1991/08/26/all-shook-up-seismic-shifts-are-altering-the-sports-landscape>.
- ⁴ Daughters, Amy. “A Timeline of College Football Conference Realignment over the BCS Era.” Bleacher Report. Accessed November 30, 2023. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2115606-a-timeline-of-college-football-conference-realignment-over-the-bcs-era>.
- ⁵ Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, and Newhouse School of Public Communication. “Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database.” Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://knightnewhousedata.org/reports>.
- ⁶ Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, and Newhouse School of Public Communication. “Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database.” Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://knightnewhousedata.org/reports>.
- ⁷ Paule-Koba, Amanda, Courtney Burson, Brett Gibbons, and Brian Lobban. “It Effects Everything We Do: Collegiate Athlete’s Perceptions of Sport-Related Travel.” *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, December 28, 2021, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19357397.2021.2018637>.