

University of Southern California

Marshall

[About Marshall](#)[Admissions](#)[Academic Programs](#)[Research & Faculty](#)[Alumni](#)[Community](#)[Aca](#)**NEWS & FEATURES**

- [News](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Magazine](#)
- [Profiles in Business](#)
- [Faculty Highlights](#)
- [Marshall in the Media](#)
- [Points of Distinction](#)
- [Media Reference Guide](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

Search Marshall



Douglass Gore
Media Relations
dgore@marshall.usc.edu
213-740-6881

Conference Switching & The Pac-10:

Why a 12-Pac Doesn't Cut It

by David M. Carter, professor of sports entertainment



Over the last several months college athletics has been engaged in a high stakes game of musical chairs as more than a dozen schools have changed conference affiliations in an effort to enhance their "Big Time" sport status. Conferences such as the Big East have lost football powers Miami and Virginia Tech to the Atlantic Coast Conference and, in response, has poached schools with incredible basketball prowess including Louisville, Cincinnati, and Marquette.

But not all conferences view such switching as a necessary and promising move. Not only doesn't the Pac-10, for one, see the value in reconfiguration, but it views such changes as risky propositions, poised to damage the brand value the conference has established and reinforced over time.

But others, such as University of South Florida President Judy Genshaft, whose school bolted the Conference USA to join the Big East, it's about an unparalleled branding opportunity. In fact, Genshaft noted as much when stating, "This is progress. As our university is growing in prestige and stature, you want to be with your peers. This reflects who we are and what we aspire to be."

In addition to the Big East and Atlantic Coast Conferences, the Atlantic 10, Mid-American, Western Athletic, and Mountain West Conferences are among those likely to undergo similar makeovers in an effort to replenish the losses suffered at the hands of the larger, better branded, and more lucrative conferences.

While these high profile changes to the college sports landscape may ultimately be about branding to those schools that have "traded up" they are, in the short term, about the expanded marketing opportunities afforded them through increased media exposure.

By becoming members of a major conference (read: those with lucrative television contracts for football and basketball), these schools now have the ability to sell their institutions to a broader, more geographically disperse customer base; one consisting not only of high school athletes/recruits, but also to corporate sponsors and potential members of the student body. Essentially, many high profile college sports events are brilliantly packaged infomercials, cleverly and often times subtly crafted to sell the merits of aligning with a particular school to advertisers while simultaneously whetting prospective students' appetites about a particular school's "college experience."

However, the conferences that have recently recruited new members have had to carefully measure the tradeoff between the incremental revenue earned through expanded sports marketing opportunities and the possible decline in the conference's academic reputation. Some of these conferences have placed themselves in a precarious position, one through which their academic standing may atrophy due to adding schools that deliver large media markets and, by extension TV ratings and sponsorship revenue, but contribute considerably less intellectual capital.

Fortunately, the Pac-10 has chosen to stand down during this conference mating dance because it too is concerned about its brand name. While potentially feasible to add two schools to the conference because doing so would enable it to then schedule a profitable conference championship football game, the Pac-10 has yet to view doing so as anything but a brand bruising move - the schools it might at one time or another considered adding do not deliver an acceptable balance of financial upside and academic esteem.

Once rumored combinations such as Brigham Young University (BYU) & University of Utah, the University of Colorado & Colorado State University, and San Diego State University & the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) all fall short due to the relative size of their television markets and academic upside when compared to the Pac-10's existing membership. Because the Pac-10 boasts such a strong presence in Southern California and the Bay Area and has great academic institutions in these markets, there is no need to roll the dice on new entrants.

In sum, the addition of any of these schools carries with it a collective risk to the Pac-10 Conference's established and revered brand that is greater than its return. Consequently, for the time being at least, the Pac-10 is "stuck" with an optimal blend of athletics and academics.

David M. Carter, Principal of the Sports Business Group, teaches the Business of Sports Entertainment at the USC Marshall School of Business and is co-author of *On the Ball: What You Can Learn about Business from America's Sports Leaders*.

About the USC Marshall School of Business

USC's Marshall School of Business provides the foundation for a process of lifetime learning and business practice. Both *U.S. News & World Report* and *BusinessWeek* rank Marshall's programs among the top 25. For more than 80 years, Marshall has provided world-class research and scholarship, preparing students for the future of business. Marshall with its many research centers and Leventhal School of Accounting focuses on a core set of skills and on strengthening its position as a global center of business education and research at the graduate, undergraduate and executive levels.
