

Geographical Accuracy of Place-Based Collegiate Athletic Conference Names in the United States

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College athletic competition constitutes a significant aspect of life in the United States. Virtually, every institution of higher learning fields intercollegiate teams in a multitude of sporting activities. Most colleges and universities join an organization, a conference of similar institutions, to enhance competition. Some also join single-sport conferences in order to participate in sports that their principal conferences do not accommodate. All conferences have names, often place-based names. Many place-based names convey their conference locations well; others fail in this regard. This essay examines the names of all 184 baccalaureate-level conferences in the United States, excludes those conference names that do not have a place basis, and divides the remaining conferences into two categories: those whose names are place appropriate and those that are not.

KEYWORDS United States, college athletics, athletic conference names

1. Introduction

Sportswriter Frank Deford (2012) said, “...as badly as athletic conferences flunk arithmetic, they do no better with geography” (para. 2). On the arithmetic side, Deford was referring to conferences whose names include a number that no longer matches the count of colleges in the conferences, like the *Big Ten Conference* with its 14 members. As for geography, he was hinting that conferences’ place-based names may mislead with respect to the spatial configuration of their member schools. This essay examines the names of all 184 baccalaureate-level conferences in the United States, excludes those conference names that do not have a place basis, and divides the remaining conferences

into two categories: those whose names are place appropriate and those that are not.

Collegiate conference names matter to member schools' students, faculty, staff, alumni, and general fans, and to those who would profit from the competition that conferences engender and enhance. Having a name in which conference schools can take pride and from which perhaps gain remuneration is noteworthy. Having a name that is outdated from the perspective of where the name suggests member schools occur and where they actually are can be misleading and off-putting. A conference whose name at one time accurately defined its sphere of athletic competition can become frozen and outdated as the membership roll of the conference shifts to accommodate new entrants and says farewell to those schools that depart. Such incongruity is the case as well with place names that no longer reflect the wishes of the population that occupies the area or the landscape characteristics that might have suggested the now outdated name. Just as a place name can be an onomastic mismatch, so can a collegiate athletic conference name. Keep the name and endure the mismatch or update the name and forgo the name's legacy?

2. Background

Athletic conferences exist in large measure to enhance athletic competition though not all conferences have had an athletic connection. Religious denominations in the United States have divided their territories into named conferences. *Southern Conference* was among the Congregational Church's divisions of Berkshire County, Massachusetts, as a local newspaper reported (*Pittsfield* (Massachusetts) *Sun* 1828). Indiana Methodists in the 1850s had a *Northwest Conference* (*Summit County* (Akron, Ohio) *Beacon* 1857) and a *South-Eastern Conference* (*Cincinnati Daily Press* 1859). Unitarians recognized both an *Ohio Valley Conference* (*Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Kentucky) 1867) and a *Missouri Valley Conference* in the 1860s (*Christian Repository* (Montpelier, Vermont)) 1868). Nonsectarian groups like the *Atlantic Coast Conference* of yachting clubs (*The New York Times* 1906), *Lone Star Conference* of journeymen stone cutters (*El Paso Herald* 1909), and *Mountain-West Conference* of electrical and electronic engineers (*Tucson Daily Citizen* 1971) also have used "conference" in their names.

Voluntary agreements to manage athletic competition among college students at different institutions began around the time of the American Civil War (Smith 2011). Harvard, Yale, Brown, and other nearby colleges sponsored rowing regattas prior to the War and afterward formalized competition by creating the *Rowing Association of American Colleges* in 1870. Following in 1875 came the *Intercollegiate Association of Amateur Athletes*, which tried to standardize track and field meets. Seeking consensus on rules different from those of English rugby, the *Intercollegiate Football Association* appeared in 1876. The *College Baseball Association* launched in 1879 in an attempt to address the conundrum

Table 1. Collective Terms for Athletic Conferences of Four Year Colleagues and Universities in the United States, 2019-2020

Collective term	Number in each category	Percent of 184
Conference	140	76
Association	29	16
League	13	9
Alliance	1	<1
Federation	1	<1
No collective term	1	<1
TOTAL	185	

Note: Total exceeds 184 because one conference uses conference and league.

about paying collegiate baseball players. Multi-sport agreements began in 1894 with the *Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association* (Smith 2011). Table 1 reveals that “conference” is by far the preferred collective term today for such athletic organizations, with the older “association” falling well behind into second place, but ahead of “league,” “alliance,” and “federation.” One conference, the *Eastern College Athletic Conference Division II Wrestling League*, uses both “conference” and “league” in its title, while *College Hockey America* eschews any collective term. Among the 184 conferences under scrutiny here, 61 add “athletic” or “athletics” to their name (33%), 44 incorporate “collegiate” or “intercollegiate” (24%), 13 include “college” or “university” (7%), and 2 interject “sports” (1%). Although beyond the scope of this project, one has to wonder why conferences prefer “athletic” or “athletics” over “sports.” The literature is silent on the matter.

Athletic conference membership is advantageous to colleges and universities. Almost no independents remain among the four-year schools, with even the famously independent University of Notre Dame warming to conference affiliations in sports other than football. Woerlein (1938, 103) said, “Conferences have without a doubt placed college athletics on a much higher plane than they occupied before the formation of the first athletic conference.” A conference builds rivalry, Suwanski wrote 40 years later, and gives “the players something to play for. As an independent, every game is the same” (1978). “New leagues continue to appear,” said Abbott, “as emerging universities seek the publicity and identity provided by structured competition” (1990, 211). Trani (1995) wrote that he and fellow university presidents viewed “conference affiliation as a source of stature for their institutions.” Suggs (2003, A37) said, “... a conference provides an identity” because, as then president Larry R. Faulkner of the University of Texas at Austin told Suggs, “a large fraction of the public’s news about an institution comes from sports reporting.”

Two sports professionals shared with me some advantages that they see their institutions derive from conference membership. On 31 July 2019, Mike Williams, an Assistant Director of Athletics at Illinois State University, said member schools (1) share revenue that comes to the conference from television

deals and from conference schools playing in post-season tournaments; (2) can turn to conference headquarters for help in pleading a case for post-season at-large tournament bids; (3) have easy access to video clips from the conference archive; (4) know that there are guaranteed opponents each year; and (5) get the chance to compete for conference-wide awards to athletes and to schools. Dennie Bridges, a retired athletics director and national championship basketball coach from Illinois Wesleyan University, told me on 6 November 2019 that “scheduling is the core advantage.” You know what schools you are playing year after year, and in some sports that means a home game and an away game each season.

Mike Williams was referring to Illinois State’s *Missouri Valley Conference* and *Missouri Valley Football Conference* affiliations and Dennie Bridges to Illinois Wesleyan’s *College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin*. These 3 were among the 157 conferences in 2019–2020 under the egis of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Another 23 conferences competed as a part of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and one conference each looked to the United States Collegiate Athletic Association (USCAA) or the American Collegiate Athletic Association for guidance. Two other conferences, the *Pacific Christian Athletic Conference* and the *Collegiate Sprint Football League*, operated independently. Lemons (2017, 32) estimated that in 2016 roughly 460,000 athletes were competing for schools in NCAA conferences, 65,000 for NAIA, and 14,000 for USCAA (some of which included two-year colleges). Oversight organizations sponsor championship contests, make and enforce recruiting and in-game rules, collect statistics on sporting events/individuals, share revenue with member schools, promote the athletic programs of member schools, and otherwise attempt to keep athletic competition fair. They do not, however, tell colleges how to name their sports conferences (Trani 1995).

How do conferences arrive at the naming decision for a new conference or replacement name for an existing conference? Name negotiations typically involve representatives from current members of an active conference or prospective members when a conference is in the formation stage. Sometimes the negotiators have included faculty appointed by their school’s administration (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1907). More recently directors of athletics, presidents, and governing boards have taken greater active roles, with the presidents and boards reserving the authority to accept or reject membership and finalize the name of the conference. In addition to names originating with college officials, ideas for conference names have come in via solicitations of college students (*Casper* (Wyoming) *Star-Tribune* 1937) and other fans (Wright 1998), as well as through the work of paid consultants (“Rivers Rise” 2019).

As is typically the case in brand development discussions at the corporate level, the process of collegiate conference naming is often secretive, with spokespersons being noncommittal with reporters, saying things like “we tossed around some ideas.” A contemporary account of a real-world instance in 1963, however, offers insights into what takes place in those closed meeting rooms

from which conferences emerge. Headquartered in Frisco, Texas, the *Southland Conference* is a NCAA enterprise with a compact distribution in 2019–2020 of 13 schools in Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. During the spring of 1963, representatives of the colleges that became the conference’s six charter members met in Austin, Texas. Sportswriter Louis Hudson was able to learn details about the meeting from Ben Cook, the sports information director at one of the six, Arlington State College, Arlington, Texas. Hudson (1963, 6) wrote

Naming an athletic conference is not as easy as one might think. Coming up with a name for a new conference...took the bulk of the three-day meeting...The name Southland Conference emerged from the meeting room after eight hours of hectic hassling... [during which] a list of seven rules concerning the name were drawn up.

Hudson did not list all the rules but noted that all 44 of the names initially submitted failed somewhere along the line. He reported that among the seven rules were specifications that the name be “geographically descriptive” and “typographically functional” so as to provide “harried headline writers” of newspapers an abbreviated way to convey the conference name (in this case SLC). Cook told Hudson that Southland was a compromise, “since it did not conform to all seven rules.”

The main purposes of this research endeavor have been to learn the names of all the conferences to which colleges granting at least the baccalaureate degree belonged in 2019–2020 and to evaluate the names of said conferences with respect to geographical appropriateness. In other words, does the conference name reflect accurately the locations of its member-school campuses?

3. Methodology

Surprising to me and by far the most comprehensive and current sources of conference names are Wikipedia’s “List of NCAA Conferences,” “List of NAIA Conferences,” and “List of USCAA Institutions,” supplemented by its “List of College Athletic Conferences in the United States.” Wikipedia in this instance is a better source than the NCAA, NAIA, or other oversight authorities. Using the Wikipedia lists, one can proceed, conference by conference, through the names of current full and associate/affiliate members, plus those of former conference members. Wikipedia authors, relying on conference and college websites, press coverage, and other sources, are quick to pick up on changes of conference membership. For instance, Wikipedia reported early that the *St. Louis Intercollegiate Athletic Conference* was set to lose one 2019–2020 member with the closure of MacMurray College in May 2020. Authors often preview coming changes in conference status or membership. The University of North Dakota is preparing to join the *Missouri Valley Football Conference* for the 2020–2021 season, and the reincarnated *Central Collegiate Hockey Association* has been getting ready to drop pucks in 2021–2022 (“List of NCAA Conferences”). Conference websites provide excellent backup information as needed.

Table 2. Conferences of Four Year Colleges and Universities not Having a Place-based Name, 2019-2020.

American Athletic Conference	Ivy League
American Collegiate Athletic Association	Landmark Conference
American Rivers Conference	Liberty League
Association of Independent Institutions	Metropolitan Swimming Conference
Big 12 Conference	Mountain Rim Gymnastics Conference
Big Sky Conference	National Christian College Athletic Association
Big Ten Conference	National Collegiate Hockey Conference
Centennial Conference	National Intercollegiate Women's Fencing Association
Coastal Collegiate Sports Association	North Coast Athletic Conference
College Hockey America	North Star Athletic Association
Collegiate Sprint Football League	Patriot League
Collegiate Water Polo Association	Patriot Rifle Conference
Commonwealth Coast Conference	Pioneer Football League
Commonwealth Coast Football Conference	Presidents' Athletic Conference
Conference USA	Red River Athletic Conference
Continental Volleyball Conference	River States Conference
Crossroads League	Skyline Conference
Frontier Conference	Summit League, The
Great America Rifle Conference	Sun Conference, The
Great American Conference	United Volleyball Conference
Horizon League	University Athletic Association

There were 184 athletic conferences to which only baccalaureate colleges and universities belonged in 2019–2020. More than two-thirds (130 or 71%) of these four-year athletic conferences sponsored competition in multiple sports, while the other 54 conferences were single sport arrangements. Seven conferences (4%) existed just for competition among women athletes. In this study, I include only fully participating conference members. Thus I exclude affiliate or associate members who might participate in a single sport, such as Macalester College in football in the *Midwest Conference*. Conferences appear and disappear, perhaps as ambitious member schools jump conferences to seek more competition and status. Or schools with declining fortunes leave in order to play teams with which they can be more competitive. Once a conference falls below a half dozen members, conference viability becomes doubtful. Conference names and conference membership for future years, therefore, will differ from those that I employed for this analysis (Smith and Hattery 2017).

As Table 2 depicts, nearly a quarter, 42 of 184 (23%), of the four-year athletic conferences did not have a name spatially specific enough for an armchair geographer to define accurately the territory their membership occupies. Most (33 of the 42, or 79%) were easy to exclude, like *Big 12 Conference*, *Centennial Conference*, *Conference USA*, *Ivy League*, *National Christian College Athletic Association*, and *United Volleyball Conference*. Granted, those who follow collegiate sports in the USA will know that the *Big 12* has a central plains legacy and that the *Ivy League* resides in New England and the Middle Atlantic states. There is nothing in their conference names, however, to clue one to these locations.

American Rivers, *Red River*, and *River States* seem to have a solid place basis in their names. None are definitive as to which river or rivers they refer. Although *Coastal Collegiate Sports Association* and *North Coast Athletic Conference* look to have place-based names, neither specifies the coast in question. In fact, *North Coast* here points not to an oceanic connection but rather to the Great Lakes.

Four of the conferences that I ultimately placed in [Table 2](#) and on the excluded list of 42 (10%) did pose a classification dilemma: *Big Sky Conference*, *Commonwealth Coast Conference*, *Commonwealth Coast Football Conference*, and *The Sun Conference*. Many associate “Big Sky Country” with the state of Montana, but the 11 full-time member schools of the *Big Sky Conference* were not just in Montana but also in eight other western states. Four of the 50 states (8%), Kentucky, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, refer to themselves as a “commonwealth,” though there is no legal difference between state and commonwealth. Massachusetts and Virginia clearly have an Atlantic Ocean coastline; and Pennsylvania does as well if one counts the estuary of the Delaware River. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts (along with Maine and Rhode Island) is the focus of the *Commonwealth* conferences; but the place basis of these conference names is confusing because Virginia, and perhaps Pennsylvania, also could qualify as the site of a “commonwealth coast.” *The Sun Conference* has members in Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida (The Sunshine State); but the sun shines across the continent and not just in the Southeast. Any college or university, on the basis of sun presence, could qualify for this conference. So its name is not sufficiently space specific.

The 142 conferences remaining are the main focus of this study. Having confirmed that each of these conferences carries a name that guides the observer to the correct geographical area of the USA, the question for me was whether the main campuses of all member schools occupy a location in that area. If the answer is “yes,” then the conference has an appropriate place-based name, geographically speaking. If not, the name is inappropriate, geographically speaking. Several tools aided me in making these 142 calls, not the least of which was more than a half century of experience as a professional geographer looking at the regional layout of the USA. Personal copies of paper atlases and online atlas sources, like Bing Maps, were occasionally helpful. When I had a question about how to delimit the modern major divisions of the country, for example, Midwest, Northwest, Southeast, I turned to a map available online that the Census Bureau has created (US Department of Commerce 2020). When there was uncertainty about the boundary details of physiographic divisions, like the Rocky Mountains or the Appalachians, I consulted maps and commentaries in *Regional Geomorphology of the United States* (Thornbury 1965) and the “Anglo-America” segment of *Regional Geography of the World* (Wheeler, Kostbade, and Thoman 1961). For watershed information, the Internet was a key source for maps, such as “Missouri Watershed Map.” I used it to position the campus of Missouri State University with respect to nearby waterways

heading northward across Springfield to the Missouri River and those southward to White River of Arkansas (Missouri Department of Natural Resources 2019).

4. Results

4.1. Geographically accurate place-based conference names

Almost two-thirds, 91/142 (64%), of the place-based conferences have an appropriate place-based name, a name that is geographically accurate. Table 3 names these conferences in alphabetical order, from *America East Conference* to *Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference*. When the conference name specifies a directional component (52 of 91 or 57%), then the members all stand in that portion of the country, as in the case of the *Big West Conference*, *Little East Conference*, and *Northeast Fencing Conference*. Multistate regions (21 of 91 or 23%) appear appropriately in such conference names as *Mid-Atlantic Rifle Conference*, *New England Collegiate Conference*, and *Upper Midwest Athletic Conference*. Members of the *Colonial Athletic Association*, *Colonial Hockey Conference*, and *Colonial States Athletic Conference* were likewise somewhere within the states that emerged from the original 13 British colonies. Conferences that derive their names from physical divisions of the country show up on this list (6 of 91 or 7%). For example, all *Appalachian Athletic Conference* member schools were somewhere in the southern Appalachian Highlands, with conference headquarters in Ashville, North Carolina, squarely within that physiographic division. The 10 full members of the *East Coast Conference* were mainly in New York State, but also in Connecticut and the District of Columbia. All members were clearly overlooking the ocean or in a state that borders the Atlantic. The remaining 12 of 91 (13%) names reference states or a metropolitan area. Member schools of the *College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin* were in one of those two states, just as members of the *Ohio Athletic Conference* were all in Ohio; those of the *Penn State University Athletic Conference* were only in Pennsylvania; the eight members of the *Empire 8 Conference* were in New York, the Empire State; and the *City University of New York Athletic Conference* confined itself to four of the five city boroughs (Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and The Bronx).

4.2. Geographically inaccurate place-based conference names

Table 4 lists the 51/142 (36%) baccalaureate conferences with geographically inaccurate—place inappropriate—names, giving for each conference the number of 2019–2020 members, the number of misplaced members, and the percentage misplaced. Of the 51 conferences in Table 4, 16 (31%) had one member out of place, 27 (53%) had between 2 and 5, 4 (8%) had 7–13 (but at least one where it should be), and 4 others (8%) had all of their members somewhere other than

Table 3. Conferences of Four Year Colleges and Universities with Geographically Accurate Place-based Names, 2019-2020.

America East Conference	Mid-South Conference
American Midwest Conference	Mid-States Football Association
Appalachian Athletic Conference	Midwest Christian College Conference
Atlantic East Conference	Midwest Collegiate Volleyball League
Big South Conference	Midwest Conference
Big West Conference	Midwest Fencing Conference
California Collegiate Athletic Association	Midwest Lacrosse Conference
Cascade Collegiate Conference	Midwest Women's Lacrosse Conference
Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference	Midwestern Intercollegiate Volleyball Association
Central Collegiate Ski Association	Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference
Central Intercollegiate Bowling Conference	Mountain West Conference
City University of New York Athletic Conference	New England Collegiate Conference
College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin	New England Intercollegiate Fencing Conference
Colonial Athletic Association	New England Women's and Men's Athletic Conference
Colonial Hockey Conference	New England Women's Hockey Alliance
Colonial States Athletic Conference	New Jersey Athletic Conference
East Atlantic Gymnastics League	New South Intercollegiate Swim Conference
East Coast Conference	North Atlantic Conference
Eastern College Athletic Conf. Division II Field Hockey	North Eastern Athletic Conference
Eastern College Athletic Conf. Division II Wrestling League	Northeast Conference
Eastern College Athletic Conference Hockey	Northeast Fencing Conference
Eastern Collegiate Football Conference	Northeast-10 Conference
Eastern Intercollegiate Ski Association	Northeastern Intercollegiate Athletics Conference
Eastern Intercollegiate Volleyball Association	Northern Athletics Collegiate Conference
Eastern Intercollegiate Wrestling Association	Northern Collegiate Hockey Association
Eastern Women's Fencing Conference	Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference
Empire 8 Conference	Northwest Conference
Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference	Ohio Athletic Conference
Great Northeast Athletic Conference	Ohio River Lacrosse Conference
Great Northwest Athletic Conference	Pacific Christian Athletic Conference
Great Plains Athletic Conference	Pacific Collegiate Swim and Dive Conference
Gulf Coast Athletic Conference	Pacific West Conference
Gulf South Conference	Peach Belt Conference
Heart of America Athletic Conference	Penn State University Athletic Conference
Heartland Collegiate Athletic Conference	Southern Athletic Association
Hockey East Association	Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference
Little East Conference	Southern Conference
Massachusetts State Collegiate Athletic Conference	Southern States Athletic Conference
Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference	Southland Conference
Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association	State University of New York Athletic Conference
Mid-Atlantic Collegiate Fencing Association	Sun Belt Conference
Mid-Atlantic Rifle Conference	Sunshine State Conference
Middle Atlantic Conference	Upper Midwest Athletic Conference
Middle Atlantic Conference Commonwealth	USA South Athletic Conference
Middle Atlantic Conference Freedom	Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference
Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference	

the area that the conference name suggests. By conference, among the 51, members misplaced ranged from a low of 6% to, of course, 100% for those with every member school out of place.

4.2.1. At least one member school in place

The venerable *Southeastern Conference* (SEC) was among 16 conferences with just a single misplaced member. After the 2019 football season ended for the

Table 4. Conferences of Four Year Colleges and Universities with at Least One Geographically Inaccurate Place-based Name, 2019-2020.

Name of conference	Total members	Misplaced members	Percent misplaced
Allegheny Mountain Collegiate Conference	11	4	36
American Southwest Conference	12	3	25
Atlantic 10 Conference	14	1	7
Atlantic Coast Conference	15	2	13
Atlantic Hockey Association	11	1	9
Atlantic Sun Conference	9	1	11
Big East Conference	10	5	50
Bluegrass Mountain Conference	7	1	14
California Pacific Conference	13	3	23
Capital Athletic Conference	6	6	100
Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association	12	12	100
Chicagoland Collegiate Athletic Conference	15	4	27
Conference Carolinas	12	2	17
Eastern Association of Rowing Colleges	18	1	6
Eastern Association of Women's Rowing Colleges	18	1	6
Eastern Intercollegiate Gymnastics League	5	1	20
Golden State Athletic Conference	10	2	20
Great Lakes Valley Conference	16	16	100
Great Midwest Athletic Conference	13	4	31
Intercollegiate Fencing Conference of Southern California	7	1	14
Kansas Collegiate Athletic Conference	13	3	23
Lone Star Conference	19	5	26
Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association	9	2	22
Mid-American Conference	12	1	8
Mid-Atlantic Rowing Conference	13	3	23
Midwest Independent Conference	6	2	33
Missouri Valley Conference	10	10	100
Missouri Valley Football Conference	10	8	80
Mountain East Conference	12	2	17
Mountain Pacific Sports Federation	41	4	10
New England Hockey Conference	12	2	17
New England Small College Athletic Conference	11	1	9
Ohio Valley Conference	12	4	33
Old Dominion Athletic Conference	15	1	7
Pac-12 Conference	12	4	33
Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference	18	1	6
Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference	16	3	19
Rocky Mountain Intercollegiate Ski Association	6	2	33
Sooner Athletic Conference	11	5	45
South Atlantic Conference	12	3	25
Southeastern Conference	14	1	7
Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference	10	2	20
Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference	13	1	8
Southland Bowling League	8	2	25
Southwestern Athletic Conference	10	8	80
St. Louis Intercollegiate Athletic Conference	10	7	70
West Coast Conference	10	1	10
Western Athletic Conference	9	1	11
Western Collegiate Hockey Association	15	13	87
Western Water Polo Association	15	4	27
Wolverine-Hoosier Athletic Conference	12	2	17

University of Missouri (Mizzou), this member of the *SEC* parted ways with its head football coach. Reporting on the coach's dismissal, an Associated Press release said that Missouri's flagship university faced tough issues in replacing Barry Odom, like low coach salaries compared to other *SEC* schools. In addition, "The school also resides outside the league's natural footprint and will forever battle *SEC* ... behemoths ... for both recruits and wins" (Skretta 2019, B8). Mizzou is a latecomer to this nearly century-old, football-obsessed conference whose roots are in the Deep South. By adding Mizzou in 2012, the *SEC* overreached its natural footprint.

Here are the reasons why the other 15 conferences with one misplaced member ended up on the list of 51 in Table 4. The Tempe campus of Arizona State University (*Intercollegiate Fencing Conference of Southern California*) is not in California. Clinton, New York, near Lake Ontario, and site of Hamilton College, is not in New England; but Hamilton belonged in 2019–2020 to the *New England Small College Athletic Conference*. Guilford College (*Old Dominion Athletic Conference*), though close to the Virginia border, is in North Carolina and not in the Old Dominion State. Shepherdstown, West Virginia, home of Shepherd University, is not in Pennsylvania; but this institution competed as a full member of the *Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference*. Savannah College of Art and Design (*Bluegrass Mountain Conference*), at coastal Savannah, Georgia, is far from the other six, mountain-based members of this swimming-only conference. The *Eastern Association of Rowing Colleges* counted 18 members in this men's NCAA conference, of which 17 are in a contiguous band of states stretching from New Hampshire to Maryland. The 18th member is the University of Wisconsin at Madison, several states and 1200–1300 km to the west of the conference core. The Madison campus also houses female crews that competed in the *Eastern Association of Women's Rowing Colleges*, where again all other member-school locations were near the eastern seaboard. Similarly, the *Eastern Intercollegiate Gymnastics League* included the University of Illinois at Chicago among its half dozen members. Wilberforce, Ohio, home of Central State University (*Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference*), is not in the South; and Brigham Young University's (*West Coast Conference*) Provo, Utah, campus lies roughly a thousand km from the western coast of North America. St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri (*Atlantic 10 Conference*); the Air Force Academy, in Colorado Springs, Colorado (*Atlantic Hockey Association*); and Lipscomb University, in Nashville, Tennessee (*Atlantic Sun Conference*) are a long way from blue water. Buffalo, home of State University of New York at Buffalo (*Mid-American Conference*), is not what geographers deem middle American. Chicago State University (*Western Athletic Conference*), on the other hand, is near the middle of the USA, not in the West.

Among the 27 conferences with from two to five geographical misplacements, were two of the "Power Five" conferences: *Atlantic Coast Conference* (ACC) and *Pac-12 Conference*. Including also the *SEC*, *Big Ten*, and *Big 12*, the Power Five wield considerable influence over television revenue and enjoy advantages

that lesser conferences do not possess. Brand value that the ACC had built since its 1953 founding surely made it an easy decision for the ACC to keep its original name when expanding far inland in 2013 to Indiana to add Notre Dame University, except for football, and likewise to Kentucky in 2014 for the University of Louisville. Obviously, neither Indiana nor Kentucky lie anywhere near the Atlantic Ocean's coastline. Out West, the *Pac-12*, formerly *Pacific Coast Conference*, had in 2019–2020 four misplaced members. In 1978, the conference added Arizona State University and the University of Arizona to what was then a California, Oregon, and Washington footprint. Later, in 2011, the newly renamed *Pac-12* successfully admitted the universities of Utah and Colorado. The ACC was one of 11 place-based conferences with two schools out of footprint, and the *Pac-12* was one of seven conferences having four misplacements. Of the remaining nine conferences in this group, six had three member schools out of place; and three included five campus locations out of sync vis-à-vis the conference names. Among those with five was the *Lone Star Conference*. One would expect members of the *Lone Star* to be in the Lone Star State, and all members were when the conference began (*Commerce (Texas) Journal* 1931). Expansion has pushed the conference beyond Texas to neighboring states Arkansas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma.

There were four conferences that had at least seven misplaced members—but also some presence within the name's footprint. Only two of the member campuses of the *Missouri Valley Football Conference*, those of South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota, were in the watershed of the Missouri River, while eight (80%) were not, with one (Youngstown State University) as far east as eastern Ohio. None of the 10 members of the *St. Louis Intercollegiate Athletic Conference* were within the city limits of St. Louis, although three of them (30%) Fontbonne University (Clayton, Missouri), Principia College (Elsah, Illinois), and Webster University (Webster Groves, Missouri) were in the St. Louis metropolitan area. Other members of this conference stretched from Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, to Fulton, Missouri, to Louisville, Kentucky. Oklahoma is the Sooner State; and the *Sooner Athletic Conference* included many schools from Oklahoma but had outliers in Arkansas, Kansas, and Texas, leaving 45% misplaced. The *Southwestern Athletic Conference* did in 2019–2020 have two Texas locations (Houston and Prairie View); but the other eight locations (80%) were in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi—clearly not southwestern. Even the conference headquarters is in Birmingham, Alabama. The *Western Collegiate Hockey Association* has reached eastward as far as Bowling Green, Ohio, and southward to Huntsville, Alabama, to enlist schools wanting to participate in this NCAA Division I group of schools whose primary athletic conferences do not sponsor intercollegiate ice hockey. Of this conference's 15 members in 2019–2020, 87% were out of footprint, leaving just the Anchorage and Fairbanks campuses of the University of Alaska in the West.

4.2.2. All member schools out of place

Only 4 of the 51 (8%) conferences had a name so badly location challenged that not a single school was in the geographical area where one would expect to find conference members. Each of the 100% geographically misnamed conferences merits a brief narrative.

The *Capital Athletic Conference* competes near the District of Columbia but does not have a member within the capital itself. Member locations included Salisbury and St. Mary's City, Maryland; York, Pennsylvania; and Buena Vista, Fredericksburg, and Newport News, Virginia. When the conference began in 1989, however, it counted among its members two within the District of Columbia, within the capital: The Catholic University of America and Gallaudet University (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 1989). The conference logo still features a profile of the capitol dome (Capital Athletic Conference 2020).

Charlotte, North Carolina, houses the headquarters of the *Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association* (CIAA). Its dozen member schools, mostly historically black colleges and universities, span the contiguous states of Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, not one of which lies in the central portion of the country, between the Appalachians and the Rocky Mountains. Dating from 1912, the CIAA was initially the *Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association*. Substitution in 1950 of "Central" for "Colored" allowed the CIAA to maintain its initialism but meant that the new name became locationally inappropriate (*Austin (Texas) American-Statesman* 1993; "History of the CIAA" 2020).

Several urban places, many with baccalaureate colleges, occur within the Great Lakes watershed; but none of these colleges were 2019–2020 members of the *Great Lakes Valley Conference* (GLVC). Instead, the GLVC counted 9 of its 16 members in Missouri, which does not border any of the lakes; 4 in Illinois; 2 in Indiana; and 1 across the Ohio in Kentucky. Lewis University, in the north-eastern Illinois community of Romeoville, was the only member even close to the drainage divide separating the Great Lakes from the Mississippi Valley (Great Lakes Valley Conference 2020).

The Missouri River's watershed is huge, occupying one-sixth of North America and claiming about one-fourth of all the agricultural land in the United States. No river in the USA is longer than the Missouri's roughly 3700 km. Yet not one of the 10 members in 2019–2020 of the *Missouri Valley Conference* (MVC) was in the watershed, although Missouri State University's Springfield campus is just a few km beyond the southern edge. At the time of its founding in 1907, the MVC counted three of the original members, the universities of Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska, within the watershed (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1907). Never, however, have all the members at any one time been within the Missouri River's enormous catchment area. The most recent watershed qualifier to leave the MVC was Creighton University (Omaha, Nebraska) in 2013.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The bad match between the member locations of the MVC and the conference name was the impetus for this study, as I watched conference membership over many years stray from the Missouri River basin, even as far off as West Texas State University (Canyon) and New Mexico State University (Las Cruces). So it was a bit of a surprise when so many names of place-based baccalaureate conferences turned out to have an excellent geographical connection (91 of 142) or only a few mislocated campuses. The MVC model turned out to be the exception rather than the rule.

Having focused here on the four-year colleges and universities in the United States, it is possible to envision research on other categories of place-based athletic conferences. Two-year colleges compete in conferences with names. High schools in nearly every, if not every, state have conferences, often with a place basis in the name. Countries other than the United States, such as Canada, have named amateur conferences. At the professional level, minor league baseball has many conferences with a geographical flavor to their names, like the *Midwest League*, *Texas League*, or *Pacific Coast League*. A classification system such as the one I employ here would serve well in onomastic studies of such conferences.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2019–2020 college athletics year ended prematurely when many winter sports terminated without the traditional post-season tournaments. Spring sports ended before the conference seasons got underway. Uncertainty pervades the sports scene at all levels, and it would not be surprising to see more conference realignment or even college and university closures for 2020–2021 and following seasons than would have otherwise been the case. As of May 2020, the *California Collegiate Athletic Association* canceled all fall 2020 sports (Gregory 2020).

Frank Deford was by no means the only journalist to make light of conference names and the naming process; but conference names obviously matter in terms of brand awareness, marketing prowess, acronym hardiness, and logo value. Adding a full-time member school that does not fit the geographic footprint of the conference is often not enough impetus for a conference to change its name. After all, that outlier newcomer someday might find a better conference fit for themselves and abandon ship. And, as I have shown, sometimes the brand is so strong that conferences are willing to add and subtract member schools to the point when none stand within the geographic footprint that the longstanding conference name implies. Conference brands typically are too valuable to drop when the membership roster changes, especially in the highly competitive, highly lucrative upper echelon of collegiate sports in the United States.

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