

ABSTRACT

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The Launch of the Big Ten Network: How 11 Universities Created Their Own Television Network and Changed the Landscape of College Sports

The creation of the Big Ten Network, a television and broadband endeavor devoted to the 11 Universities that comprise the Big Ten Conference, sent a ripple throughout higher education. This study traces a brief history of collegiate broadcasting, with particular focus on the pivotal role played by the Big Ten Conference. An examination of the marketplace opportunities that existed as the idea was constructed gives the reader insight as to the complexities that college presidents and conference commissioners' face when negotiating with television and cable networks. Instead of receiving broadcast rights fees for the televising of selected football and basketball games, the Presidents in the Conference decided to start their own broadcast venture. While many assume this project was just about money and sports, through a series of interviews with the key individuals involved, and a review of memorandums and meeting minutes, there is more to the story.

The Network became a means to deliver the message about the values and brand of the Big Ten Conference. No longer satisfied with having the broadcast networks "control the message" about their schools, the new channel addresses some of the social issues that impact today's campuses. The Network decided not to permit any alcohol or gambling commercials, and decided that by 2010, 50% of all programming would be devoted to women's sports. Throughout the process, it was evident that the Presidents had numerous opportunities to change direction and seek more money, yet decided that their values were more important.

The Network also presents the opportunity to showcase the student athletes, the faculty and with 660 hours per year devoted to campus wide programming, the wider range of life on a Big Ten campus.

This study provides a roadmap for college commissioners and presidents seeking to use the explosion of digital television and new media technology to promote and enhance their campus identity. The study concludes with recommendations for the senior leadership teams as to how to redirect some of the substantial dollars that the Network will generate to uses that resonate with the land grant mission of many of the campuses.

As part of the CSRI Conference, the presentation will include recent developments in the media rights deals currently in place as well as potential media impact on conference expansion. Both the Big Ten and the Pac 10 have gone public with their desires to explore adding additional members.