

Will Loyola Join New Athletic Conference? School Officials say no to any realignment – at least not yet

By Nick Amatangelo

Top officials at Loyola University Chicago say they're not planning to jump from the Horizon League for a new athletic conference populated by seven Catholic colleges departing the Big East.

But Loyola is leaving the door open to the possibility of conference realignment down the road.

Fr. Michael Garanzini, S.J., president of the university, has recently alluded to a potential shift from the Horizon League.

“As we improve, you will continue to see some radical changes in both our athletic program and in our competitive edge. Specifically, our movement to another league depends on a number of factors, some out of our control. We are working on those factors within our control,” Garanzini said in a statement emailed to the Phoenix.

Those under Garanzini were not as willing to commit to the direction in which the school is headed.

According to Athletic Director and Assistant Vice President Dr. Grace Calhoun, “We are not actively seeking to leave the [Horizon] league.”

Dr. Robert Kelly, vice president of student affairs, echoed this sentiment, saying that “we’re trying to make ourselves the best in the Horizon League we can.”

But in a sign that Loyola is keeping its options open, Calhoun also said, “We are monitoring the conference realignment very closely.”

Kelly also did not rule out Loyola changing their stance to become a more aggressive player in the conference alignment.

“It’s really important to take the lead from our students,” he said.

Kelly went on to explain that if the students expressed a strong opinion in Loyola departing from the Horizon League, university officials would re-examine their current stance.

Neither Calhoun nor Kelly would say if the university had been contacted by other conferences as part of an expansion plan.

In recent months, Loyola has made moves to put athletics at the forefront of campus life with the high-profile hiring of Calhoun, a former Indiana University associate athletic director and the hiring of men's basketball Coach Porter Moser.

This comes against the backdrop of seven Catholic schools leaving the Big East to build a new Catholic conference from teams across the country. The Catholic Seven, comprised of DePaul, Villanova, Georgetown, Marquette, Providence, Seton Hall and Saint John's, left the Big East because they felt the conference was no longer taking their voices into consideration. The Big East, losing numerous members for football reasons, sought to bring more football-based members to the conference. With the exception of Georgetown, none of the Catholic Seven have serious football teams and felt that the teams the Big East were enlisting would only hurt the prestige of the basketball teams. This prompted the Catholic Seven to depart the Big East and presumably form their own league.

While Loyola fits into the Catholic Seven's profile of a Catholic school with no football team, Calhoun believes that leaving the Horizon League is not in the university's plan in the near future.

Calhoun did admit that the presidents of universities drive most decisions on conference realignment and athletic directors do not usually play the crucial role in making the final decisions.

Loyola helped found the Horizon League in 1979. Currently, the Horizon League is made up of Loyola, Valparaiso, Wright State, Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Wisconsin-Green Bay, Youngstown State, Cleveland State, Illinois-Chicago and Detroit universities. Aside from Loyola, Detroit is the only other Catholic university in the conference.

Loyola wants to focus on building and maintaining a program that leads to a quality experience for the student athletes, according to Calhoun.

"When you focus on your own institutions and do good things, then the rest works itself out," Calhoun said.

Proponents for realignment point out the lucrative television deal that the Catholic Seven will reportedly sign once all the dust has settled. According to ESPN.com, the highest bid as of Jan. 6, is \$500 million over 12 years for a 10-12 member conference. While this would provide a boon to Loyola athletics if they were to sign on to the Catholic Seven, Calhoun says it would come at a price.

"The conferences that have more money coming in from television and other conference agreements are also spending a lot more. It's a matter of looking at what comes in and what goes out," Calhoun said.

When asked if Loyola had been contacted to join the Catholic Seven, a Marquette University spokesperson said they had no comment about the situation. A DePaul University representative

stated that, “We are still members of the Big East conference right now,” and had no further comment.

Representatives from the Atlantic 10 and Missouri Valley Conferences could not be reached as of press time to see if they had reached out to Loyola.

While the dust is far from settled, Kelly said that he doesn’t “think it’s ever too late” to contemplate conference realignment.

Garanzini added that he “want[s] to be realistic. Over the past several years, we have had the opportunity to hire a new [athletic director] and a new coach, both critical to advancing our program and for increasing our opportunities.”

Whether Loyola chooses to stay in the Horizon League or depart for greener pastures, it will certainly be interesting to see how the story plays out.