

The BCS: The Only Viable Option

Each year the Bowl Championship Series determines the champion of college football. It has also become a heated controversy in today's society. Many football fans believe this debate exists because of the BCS's inability to crown an undisputed champion. However, a closer look reveals the debate is rooted in more than just football. The opponents of the BCS feel larger universities have a better chance of becoming champion and gaining the financial benefits of postseason games. They want a playoff system that would even the playing field for smaller schools and equally distribute the wealth among all universities. While the opponents have reasonable arguments, eliminating the BCS would greatly hurt college football, universities, and the national economy. The BCS should remain for three reasons: its effectiveness, the financial benefits, and flaws of a playoff system.

What determines if a college football system is effective? The answer is simple: when the end of the season culminates in the top two teams going head-to-head. Critics of the BCS argue it is unable to achieve this simple request. However, nine out of the last twelve championships have been played between the top two teams, a feat only accomplished in eight out of fifty-six seasons under the old format (Hancock 14). Opponents of the BCS claim that its ineffectiveness can be seen through the displeasure of college football coaches and administrators across the country. In 2007, the University of Oklahoma was on the losing end of the BCS formula. However, Head Coach Bob Stoops did not request a playoff. In fact, he supported the BCS, saying, "The current system is a sort of playoff" (qtd in Davis). While he is just one coach, Mike Slive, ointed out "the playoff issue comes up every year at the NCAA's Athletic Directors annual meeting and receives tepid, if any, support" (qtd in Davis). While it might be hard to swallow, there seems to be little support from coaches or university officials for a playoff system. Not only is the BCS supported, statistics have proven it is more effective than the previous system.

There is a lot to be gained financially from the BCS. First, the universities benefit. The NCAA mandates that every bowl game must pay participating schools at least \$1 million (Nixon 385). In many cases, schools help all of their athletic teams operate with this revenue. Nixon says this leaves universities in a tough situation "By eliminating a major source of revenue, it poses the question of what athletic departments will do now to balance the budget" (384). But this is not the only revenue generating opportunity for universities. The NCAA requires each bowl game to have a television contract and title sponsor. These two entities can bring in large sums of cash for schools.

Second, besides the profits of participating schools the NCAA reaps financial gains. Nixon's research shows that the NCAA gains \$408,000 in revenue due to the license fees they charge each bowl game (384). Third, the host cities of the five BCS bowls profit greatly. These host cities are flooded with tens of thousands of fans infusing money into various sectors of the city. Research published in "House Bill 309" concluded "the total economic gain from the five Bowl Championship Series games in January 2008 was estimated at more than \$1.2 billion" (qtd in Nixon). The ten-figure sum would be eliminated from entering a struggling economy with the dismissal of the BCS. Additionally, the BCS creates numerous jobs, helping reduce unemployment in cities across the nation. The elimination of the BCS would financially hurt universities, athletic departments, the NCAA and numerous American cities.

A playoff system would hurt two major aspects of college football: the regular season and the student athletes. Additionally, it does not completely eliminate controversy. First, a playoff system would diminish the importance of the regular season. Specifically, a playoff system would allow numerous teams to have a shot at the title at the end of the season. In contrast, the BCS only allows the top two teams to go to the championship game. Hancock explains from August to December fans across the nation anxiously anticipate the results from game to game and conference to conference weekly (1). All of the fans know one loss can keep their team from reaching the championship game. Fans are not the only ones that feel this way. Stoops criticizes a playoff system saying it will "...strip the game of its no-tomorrow excitement" (qtd in Davis). Furthermore, with this loss of viewership from fans comes a loss of interest from sponsors; downsizing college football's positive economic impact.

Next, a playoff system would hurt the student athletes by lengthening the football season. Nixon feels that all parties are forgetting that the players are also college students (388). College athletes are not paid to participate in athletics nor are they compensated for post-season games. If a playoff were to take effect, games would run into December, the time where universities take exams, or into the beginning of their spring semester. University administrators are determined to keep that from happening. Dr. Todd Kays encourages

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student athletes to focus on their education. Kays states that only 2 percent of college players who are seniors will make it to the NFL (1). That leaves 98 percent of players that will need to be prepared for life off the football field after college. Consequently, the parties involved in this debate must remember football remains second to school.

Lastly, a playoff system does not remove controversy from college football. Critics of the BCS are angry because deserving teams get left out. Hancock argues that this would be increased by a playoff. "Think it is tough picking the top two? Try selecting eight or sixteen," he said (1). While the playoff would include additional teams, it would leave out more teams with similar records. Moreover, because of this criticism a playoff system could be pressured to expand, creating more games during the postseason. While this statement may seem fallacious, history proves differently. The NCAA men's basketball tournament started with only eight teams (Hancock 1), now it is up to 64. As previously discussed, increased number of post season games would hurt the academic experience of the athletes. Between a playoff system's ability to diminish the regular season and hurt the student athletes, and its inability to eliminate controversy, it is clear that the proposal is flawed.

Nothing is perfect. The BCS is no different. But, currently we have a system that has proven to be effective, and it has provided revenue to universities, athletic departments, the NCAA, and cities across the nation. Similarly, we have a proposal that will tarnish the excitement of the regular season, hinder the education of college students and fail to remove controversy from college football. No one believes the BCS is a final product. However, replacing the current system with an unproven alternative would undoubtedly assist in unraveling an already unstable economy. The risk is not worth any imagined reward.

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The week after New Year's Day in millions of homes and bars around the country, sports fans huddle around televisions to watch the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) to determine the champion of college football. The participants are chosen by averaging the *USA Today's* Coaches' Poll, The Harris Interactive Poll of media, former players and coaches, and the average of six computer rankings. The BCS was originally rotated among four bowls – the Rose, Orange, Fiesta, and Sugar – but in 2006 it became a separate bowl game. It has also become a heated controversy. Many football fans believe this debate exists because of the BCS's inability to crown an undisputed champion. However, a closer look reveals the debate is rooted in more than just football. The opponents of the BCS feel larger universities have a better chance of becoming champion and gaining the financial benefits of postseason games. They want a playoff system that would even the playing field for smaller schools and equally distribute the wealth among all universities. While the opponents have reasonable arguments, eliminating the BCS would greatly hurt college football programs, universities, and local and national economies. The BCS should remain THE national championship game for three reasons: its effectiveness, the financial benefits, and the flaws of a playoff system.

What determines if a college football system is effective? The answer is simple: when the end of the season culminates in the top two teams going head-to-head. Critics of the BCS argue it is unable to achieve this simple request. However, Bill Hancock, BCS Executive Director, says in an article he wrote for *USA Today* that these critics are mistaken. He points out that nine out of the last twelve championships have been played between the top two teams, a feat only accomplished in eight out of fifty-six seasons under the old format (14). Opponents of the BCS claim that its ineffectiveness can be seen through the displeasure of college football coaches and administrators across the country. Yet in 2007, when the University of Oklahoma was on the losing end of the BCS formula, Head Coach Bob Stoops did not request a playoff. In fact, he supported the BCS, saying, "The current system is a sort of playoff" (qtd in Davis). While he is just one coach, Mike Slive, SEC Commissioner, points out "the playoff issue comes up every year at the NCAA's Athletic Directors annual meeting and receives tepid, if any, support" (qtd in Davis). While it might be hard to swallow, there seems to be little support from coaches or university officials for a playoff system. Not only is the BCS supported, but statistics have proven it is more effective than the previous system.

In addition to the effectiveness of the BCS, there is a lot to be gained economically from this bowl game. First, the universities benefit. Leslie Nixon, author of the article "Playoff or Bust," points out that the NCAA mandates that every bowl game must pay participating schools at least \$1 million (385). In many cases, schools help all of their athletic teams operate with this revenue. For example, sports such as golf, tennis and swimming are usually not fully supported by self-generated funds, so BCS proceeds help support these programs. But this is not the only revenue-generating opportunity for universities. The NCAA requires each bowl game to have a television contract and title sponsor; past series have been sponsored by companies such as Tostitos, FedEx, Allstate, and Citi. The television contract and sponsors literally bring millions of dollars to participating schools.

Besides the profits of participating schools, the BCS financially benefits both the NCAA and the host cities. Nixon's research shows that the NCAA gains \$408,000 in revenue due to the license fees they charge each bowl game (384). Host cities, including Glendale, New Orleans, Miami Gardens, and Pasadena, profit greatly. These host cities are flooded with tens of thousands of fans infusing money into various sectors of the local economy, from hotels and restaurants to shopping malls and gas stations. Research published in "House Bill 309" concludes "the total economic gain from the five Bowl Championship Series games in January 2008 was estimated at more than \$1.2 billion" (qtd in Nixon). The ten-figure sum would be eliminated from aiding a struggling economy with the dismissal of the BCS. The elimination of the BCS would financially hurt universities, athletic departments, the NCAA and numerous American cities.

A final consideration in this controversy is that a playoff system would hurt two major aspects of college football: the regular season and the student athletes. Additionally, it does not completely eliminate controversy. First, a playoff system would diminish the importance of the regular season. Specifically, a playoff system would allow numerous teams to have a shot at the title at the end of the season. In contrast, the BCS only allows the top two teams to go to the championship game. Hancock explains that from August to December fans across the nation anxiously anticipate the results from game to game and conference to conference weekly (1). All of the fans know one loss can keep their team from reaching the championship game. Fans are not the only ones that feel this way. Stoops criticizes a playoff system, saying it will "...strip the

game of its no-tomorrow excitement” (qtd in Davis). With this potential loss of viewership from fans would come a loss of interest from sponsors, thereby downsizing college football’s positive economic impact.

While the economic impact of this billion dollar industry certainly factors into the championship discussion, the most important factor is often overlooked: the student athlete. A playoff system would hurt the student athlete by lengthening the football season. Nixon feels that all parties are forgetting that the players are also college students (388). College athletes are not paid to participate in athletics nor are they compensated for post-season games. In theory, their payoff comes with a college degree. In addition to the thousands of hours put in to practice and the pressures of playing, student athletes must also matriculate as fulltime college students to stay eligible and to earn their degrees. Under the BCS system, the players finish their regular season before final exams begin, so they are able to focus on getting through the exam period. If a playoff were to take effect, games would run into December, interfering with exams, or into the beginning of their spring semester. University administrators are determined to keep that from happening. Dr. Todd Kays, Sports Psychologist, uses alarming statistics from *SportsKid Magazine* in his article encouraging student athletes to focus on their education. Kays states that only two percent of college players who are seniors will make it to the NFL (1). That leaves 98 percent of players that will need to be prepared for life off the football field after college. In fairness to the players, the parties involved in this debate must remember football remains second to school.

Lastly, a playoff system does not remove controversy from college football. Critics of the BCS are angry because deserving teams get left out. Hancock argues that this would only be increased by a playoff. “Think it is tough picking the top two? Try selecting eight or sixteen,” he suggests (1). While the playoff would include additional teams, it would leave out more teams with similar records. Moreover, because of this criticism a playoff system could be pressured to expand, creating more games during the postseason. While this statement may seem like a fallacious slippery slope, history proves differently. The NCAA men’s basketball tournament started with only eight teams (Hancock 1); now it is up to 64. As previously discussed, increased number of post season games would hurt the academic experience of the athletes. Between a playoff system’s ability to diminish the regular season and hurt the student athletes, and its inability to eliminate controversy, it is clear that the proposal is flawed.

Admittedly the BCS is not a perfect system – but it has proven to be effective and it has provided revenue to universities, athletic departments, the NCAA, and cities across the nation. Alternately, we have a proposal that would tarnish the excitement of the regular season, jeopardize the progress of student athletes, and fail to remove controversy from college football. No one believes the BCS is flawless; however, replacing the current system with an unproven alternative is not the answer. The current BCS is the only viable option to determine the national champion of the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision. Between the Harris and Coaches’ Polls and the computer rankings, the team bringing home the crystal ball from the early January matchup deserves to be called the national champion.

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