

College Bowl Games: From the Sublime to the Ridiculous

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Not long ago playing a college football bowl game was something of institutional pride—parades and other events occupied the days in advance. Alumni filled the stadiums. Players were student-athletes, most graduated, and their teams were coached by men for the love of the game. All of that has changed!

College football bowl games have gone from the sublime to the ridiculous. This year's forty bowl-game schedule tipped the scales of all reason. Having teams with 6-6 records was bad enough, but this year the NCAA reached an all-time low. Three teams with 5-7 losing records will play. To provide credence for this decision the NCAA used the team's most recent Academic Progress Rating to select the teams—even that doesn't take away the bitter taste!

The teams included in the list were Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and San Jose State. Missouri declined; with all of their problems at least they got this one right. The others jumped at the opportunity, so the three will be playing in the Foster Farms Bowl, Quick Lane Bowl and the Cure Bowl.

Once again our nation's foremost college presidents have taken another step in their long-standing practice of succumbing to the almighty dollar. Somehow they continue to miss the point—athletic expenditures are growing faster than new income and at a rate significantly higher than increases for academic programs—it's about spending!

The latest comprehensive study reported that when governmental, student and university subsidizes were removed from the nation's major athletic programs only eight institutions broke even or turned a profit. Hats off to the real winners—Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana State, Michigan, Nebraska, Penn State, Oklahoma and Texas at Austin.

Over the last thirty-five years, the number of bowl games has increased from fifteen to forty. This timeframe also witnessed the greatest spike ever in college costs. While medical costs escalated six times, student costs jumped ten-fold at private institutions and skyrocketed twelve times at public universities.

Rising student athletic fees and the use of institutional subsidizes to athletic programs are a part of these costs, and contribute directly to the \$1.3 trillion in student-loan debt now faced by college graduates.

More bowl games are not the answer; certainly fewer would be a step in the right direction. The University of Connecticut lost over in million dollars in their recent bowl appearance. Average attendance is at the lowest average in thirty-five years. President's bending down to take teams with losing records is not the answer. More of the same won't work.

University presidents must rethink the entire athletic paradigm and then commit to a long-term process that eliminates the use of student athletic fees, eradicates real and hidden institutional athletic subsidies and make athletics fully responsible for living within the funds it generates. Such reform will be long and tedious, but without significant change both athletics and academic institutions risk the likelihood of an unpalatable political solution.

Rather than waiting, university presidents should seize opportunity by passing NCAA resolutions to:

- Reduce the number of football bowl games to twenty-five with the selection of teams based upon poll and computer rankings of the top fifty teams, expand the playoff system to the top eight teams and schedule the bowl games in the rank order of the teams playing. (Rationale: Restore the dignity of football bowl games, select teams based on the quality of their records, place more emphasis on playing the game on the field rather than having “experts” split hairs, and provide a sense of order to the culmination of the season.)
- Establish a ten-year process that will result in athletic programs “living within their means.” (Rationale: Eliminate the use of student athletic fees and dollars from other institutional sources currently used to support athletics; thereby, reducing the costs of higher education and reallocating dollars to academic programs.)
- Negotiate an ongoing contract with the National Football League that will annually increase the League’s subsidization of football scholarships in the nation’s major football programs. (Rationale: Currently universities function as a “quasi minor-league system for the NFL. It’s time for the NFL to pay its fair share so the financial burden on students can be eliminated.)
- Negotiate an ongoing contract with the National Basketball Association that will annually increase the Association’s subsidization for all Division I basketball programs. (Rationale: Same as for the NFL.)
- Establish an open process to measure institutional progress toward “living within their means,” and that significant scholarship reductions would result for those found in non-compliance. (Rationale: Create a public process with stringent penalties.)

It’s time to restore dignity to college bowl games—make them meaningful and uplifting again rather than sticking with the mundane.

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